

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## WHAT IS BASIC ABOUT ENGLISH?

MORTIMER J. ADLER

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Part 3 of 3

Mr. Adler is Professor of the Philosophy of Law, the University of Chicago, and co-instructor with President Hutchins of the Honor section which studies "The Great Books."

- E. Before I go on to my second main point, let me digress for a moment to consider an objection that some of you may have in mind. You may say that with recent developments in semantics these deplorable conditions are being remedied. You may be of the opinion—for I have met some English teachers who are—that every English teacher should become a semanticist, on the ground that he will thereby unite grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and rectify the situation I have described.
- a) Let me concede at once that there is some slight truth in this notion, for semantics is a general approach to the problems of communication. That semantics has captured wide interest betokens our vague uneasiness about the declining state of the liberal arts.
  - b) But there are a number of defects to this solution, which I should like to call attention to briefly.
    - (1) In the first place, semantics has been chiefly developed by philosophers; as a matter of fact, not even by philosophers, but by symbolic logicians; and their conception of the scope of grammar is woefully narrow, stressing logical syntax to the exclusion of poetic construction, disregarding the field of practical rhetoric, as well as the whole field of poetic rhetoric. (Let me refer you here to

an excellent article by Professor Philip Wheelwright on "The Semantics of Poetry," in the *Kenyon Review*, for the Summer, 1940, in which he shows plainly how inadequate all existing semantic discipline is for the understanding of poetry, and in which he criticizes, by the way, the work of Mr. Richards precisely on the ground that he has misapplied a logical rhetoric, or semantics, in analyzing poetry. An even deeper criticism of the positivism which underlies literary criticism as done by semanticists is to be found in an article by Allen Tate on "The Present Function of Criticism," in the *Southern Review* for Autumn, 1940. Again Mr. Richards is picked on as the target of attack, not simply because he is a leading semanticist of the Benthamic variety, but because he is the only one who has made a substantial effort to apply that kind of semantics to poetry. I take it that Mr. Richards has lately repudiated his early scientism or positivism. We should be grateful for that, but even more grateful to him for having experimented so extensively with an error, thus exhibiting the inadequacies of contemporary semantics.)

- (2) In the second place, all modern semantics, including the work of Bentham and his followers, as well as that of the symbolic logicians and the logical positivists who used to be in Vienna and now circle around Harvard, Columbia, and Chicago, is at best a faint recollection and a gross reconstruction of the liberal arts—the trinity of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Our most eminent semanticists regard themselves as innovators, but they are innovators only accidentally, through ignorance of the traditional teaching of the liberal arts. Not knowing how much there is to learn of their own semantic distinctions and rules from Plato and Aristotle, St. Augustine and the great thirteenth-century masters of the arts, and even from such moderns as Arnauld, the Port Royalist, and John Locke, they falsely suppose they are discovering, when in fact they are doing a very incomplete job of recovering, the liberal arts.
- (3) Finally, and worst of all, this contemporary ad-

venture in the liberal arts, which goes by the name of semantics, is fundamentally misguided because it is directed by false philosophical theories of the nature of man and of the world.

- (a) Thus Bentham and his followers are fundamentally materialists with regard to nature and regard man as a creature of sense and passion but not of intellect and will.
- (b) Similarly, the symbolic logicians and the logical positivists are materialists or sensationalists.
- (c) As a result of these philosophical errors, the modern semanticist is a self-defeating liberal artist, one for whom vast realms of literature become nonsense, because, by his principles, the words they use can refer to nothing. He cannot handle abstractions; he distorts poetic references; he misunderstands the logic of oratory. Test him, for example, on Aristotle's magnificent dictum that poetry is more philosophical than history because it deals with the universal.

- c) In short, semantics, like contemporary English teaching, is good in so far as it is the only vestige we have left of the liberal arts in our education and our culture; it is to be praised as reminiscent and nostalgic of something better; but when we really understand what that better thing was, we must acknowledge that semantics, like contemporary English teaching, must be condemned for failing to do the very thing which makes it so basically important.

III. Second point: Discourse is heterogeneous, but the liberal arts are unified, and therefore all kinds of reading and writing must be done together and not under existing departmental separations.

- 1. This second point follows from what has already been said. If the aim, in teaching reading and writing, is not simply the ability to write or read a sentence or at most a paragraph, but rather a whole work, then the teaching of writing and reading must be undertaken by a comparative study of all the different types of works, for otherwise the student will lack the rhetorical distinctions and principles necessary for guiding

him in the use of grammatical and logical or poetic techniques.

- A. For the same reason that many English teachers now realize that it is necessary to acquaint the student with every poetic form—with regard to his skill in writing as well as his skill in reading—they should also see the general principle which is here involved. If it is true that the student has not learned to write well or read well, from the point of view of imaginative compositions, if he can read only lyrics or only plays, then it is more generally true that to possess the liberal arts of reading and writing, without qualification, he must be able to do every sort of writing and every sort of reading—at least every sort of reading.
- B. Now this cannot be accomplished if English teachers restrict “literature” to belles-lettres; or, if when they extend their assignments to include other materials, such as philosophical essays or scientific works, they treat them all as if they were belles-lettres. Though a naturally great teacher in his day, John Erskine used to commit this fallacy in reading books with his students: he had only one set of criteria for interpreting them or judging them, exclusively “literary” or aesthetic criteria. For him to say that every great book should be read as literature meant that only poetic excellence was worth discussing. The opposite error is, of course, equally regrettable, namely, the historical, sociological, or scientific reading of great works of poetry.
- C. Nor is the truth here a principle of indifference. It will not do to say that any book can be equally well read in any way. You can read it as if it were a poem or as if it were a scientific exposition. It makes no difference. In fact, the only error, from this point of view, is to suppose that books have intrinsic characteristics which cannot be transgressed without doing them violence.
- D. The truth, it seems to me, is that every great work has a primary rhetorical dimension, poetic or expository, and exists in one of the subordinate forms of these. According to that dimension and form it must meet certain criteria of stylistic excellence; it must be submitted to proper principles of interpretation and criticism, involving distinctions in grammar and logic. (This does not exclude secondary interpretations, for every great work has

more than one rhetorical dimension.)

- E. If this be right, then the liberal arts cannot be well taught unless in the teaching of them every different sort of book is read in the context of books of every other sort; and unless every different type of writing is undertaken in imitation of the great models of every rhetorical type.
2. I need not take your time to tell you that, under present educational conditions, the great books are not read together and in intimate juxtaposition any more than the arts are taught together or in relation to all the books.
- A. Certain books belong to the English department; others are specialized in by the philosophers; the great works of mathematics, science, and history are not read at all, because these departments use textbooks for the sake of getting subject matter memorized by students who cannot read the great books in these fields and through them come to understand, not memorize, the principles of these subject matters.
- B. I know, of course, that a large number of the great books on the St. John's list are scattered throughout the variety of elective courses in an ordinary college curriculum. Many of them are, however, treated as supplementary rather than required reading, despite the violence done a great book by making it supplementary to something which is its inferior—an ordinary teacher's lectures or the textbooks written by his colleagues.
- C. But even if all were required, I would not be satisfied as long as they were split up into a hundred courses, separated one from another, and separated from instruction in the liberal disciplines of reading and writing. Shakespeare, Montaigne, Machiavelli, Descartes, Leonardo, Galileo, Bacon, Rabelais, Harvey, Newton, Milton, Locke—here, for example, is a heterogeneous collection, all of which should be read together by the same students *with the same teacher*.
- D. It is, for the most part, only in the English department that books are read, not for their subject matter alone, but as occasions for developing skill in reading and writing; and even that is rapidly becoming less so as English teachers spend most of their time on the history and sociology of whatever it is they read.

3. I conclude, therefore, that as books are now read in most high schools and colleges—even if they were the great books, as unfortunately in many cases they are not—the reading of them is not done in a way that facilitates the major aim of liberal education, the development of liberal artists, the production of disciplined, as well as cultivated, minds.

#### IV. Conclusion.

1. I return, therefore, at the end, to the point with which I began: what is basic about the teaching of English is the vestige of the traditional liberal education it still exhibits, however poorly and inadequately. Hence, if teachers of English recognize themselves as the only surviving academic representatives of this tradition, they should find it in their hearts to work for the abolition of the sort of educational system which now prevents them, or anyone else, from doing the main job effectively.
2. If you, then, ask me what I am proposing to substitute, I can answer you in two ways: (1) I can refer you to the St. John's curriculum as the only curriculum which is genuinely devoted to liberal education; or (2) I can answer you by stating three negations which, if established, would create an educational vacuum into which genuinely liberal education would have to rush, if teachers and students still got together. The three negations are: abolish all departments, abolish all electives, abolish all textbooks.
3. Furthermore, let me point out that what I am saying applies equally to high school or college, for we waste four years in American education, or certainly at least two. The kind of liberal education I am talking about should follow elementary schooling and precede the specialized education of the university. It should be the secondary level of education, and whether you call it secondary or collegiate, whether you call the four-year course in which it is given a high-school or a college course, makes no difference, for this is the education which should terminate in a B.A. degree restored to its proper meaning.
4. Finally, let me say that although the great books introduce every subject matter into this scheme of education, its aim is not a mastery of subject matter but the acquisition of discipline. The great books, and all the subject matters, are involved, because without them it is impossible to acquire discipline, to train minds in all the skills of reading and writing,

speaking and listening, and, perforce, the skills of thinking. But the point always to be remembered is that the sort of education which consists in the mastery of a subject matter can never be acquired in high school or college, for the students are much too young, much too immature and inexperienced, to get such an education in the full sense. All that they can get is the sort of education which consists in acquiring the disciplines of learning itself, so that, whether they go on to the university or not, they will be prepared to take care of their own education from that point on. This is the whole meaning of a liberal education as signified by bachelorhood in the liberal arts, for that degree should not be taken as marking the accomplishment of learning but only as indicating a man who, because liberally disciplined, is now able to pursue learning by himself.



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Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher Emeritus

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

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