

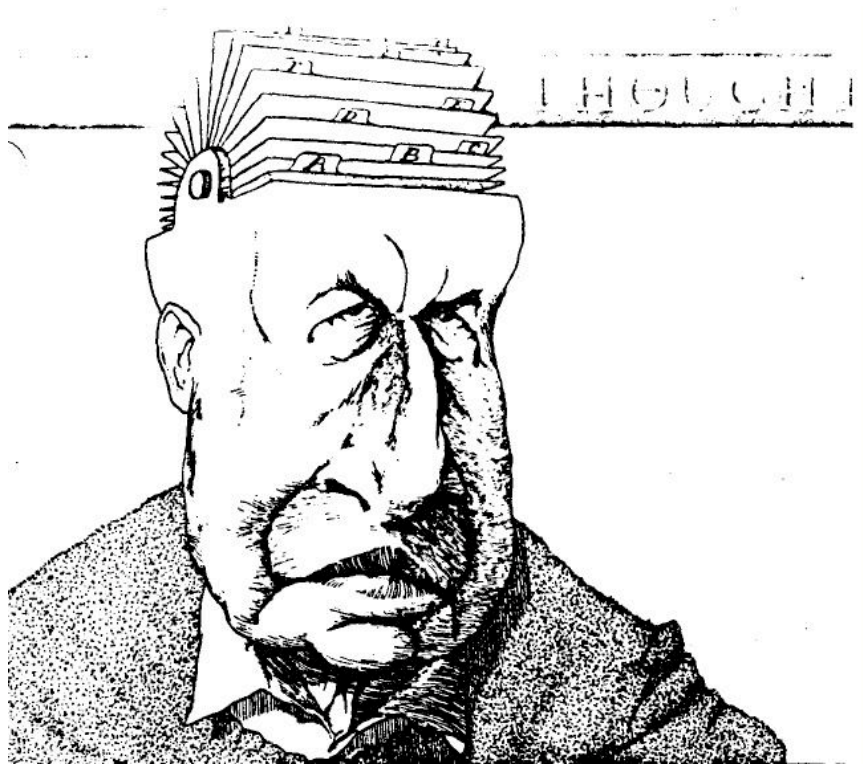
THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Three different ways in which the mind can be improved are 1) by the acquisition of organized knowledge; 2) by the development of intellectual skills; and 3) by the enlargement of understanding, insight, and aesthetic appreciation.

—Mortimer J. Adler



Please Welcome My Next Idea

*Truth, Beauty, Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, Goodness,
Public Television, Liberty, Bill Moyers,
Equality, the Aspen Institute, and Justice.*

Hugh Kenner

“I HAVE, OF COURSE,” writes Mortimer J. Adler, “read most of the great books on the subject, and some of the nearly great.” The “subject” is God, and of the books about God that our man has not read, you will observe that he knows already which ones are great, which ones no more than nearly great. And how does he know that, not having read them? Does he trust the anonymous pesters of labels on packages? Does it take one to know one?

WETAKE YOU NOW TO THE NEXT WORLD. At his desk in a cubicle just past the receptionist’s station, the Recording Angel fingers his Rolodex. Whether ablaze in some random shaft of transfulgences or occulted by floating wisps, his face does not lose its disorienting resemblance to Howard Cosell’s. It has been a long day in Eternity. On the hat stand to his left he has hung his halo. Unbuckled, furred, his Dacron wings, all six, gleam from a species of umbrella stand. His tie is loose about an unbuttoned collar. The client of the moment, in yellow Lacoste shirt and slate blue slacks, hands clasped between his knees, hunches forward.

ANGEL: Adler, Mortimer Jerome. Born (he consults the card) N.Y.C., 28 Dec. ‘02; s. Ignatz and Clarissa (Manheim) A.; PhD. Columbia U., 1928 . . . Associate editor *Great Books of the Western World*, 1945–; dir. editorial planning, 15th ed. Enc. Brit., 1966–; Columbia in the ‘20s . . . John Erskine’s time, I suppose; and John Dewey’s?

ADLER: (quick to ignore the mention of Dewey): Marvelous teacher, John Erskine. I read the Great Books under his guidance. We read about sixty books in two years, and discussed them once a week on Wednesday nights. I learned, I think, how to discuss the Great Books and how to lead discussions of the Great Books from him. And the more I read them, the more I studied them, the more I led discussions of them, the more I discovered that the heart of the Great Books was the Great Ideas—the Great Ideas they discuss—there in those books is the Western discussion, the Western consideration.... (“Truth”)

ANGEL: Wait, wait, we are not at Columbia. We are sticklers for syntax here. And “Western,” what is “Western”?

ADLER: Western . . . why, Western. As in Western Man.

ANGEL: (producing a globe): Man west of what? The Timor Sea? The Urals? Cincinnati?

ADLER: Bill Moyers never asked me such things.

ANGEL: True, I have the transcript. (He opens a file.) Bill Moyers asked you—that was at Aspen, in front of a TV camera—”But are you looking at the world from a peculiarly Western center?” He assumed you knew what he meant.

ADLER: He did know what I meant. And I told him . . .

ANGEL: I have in front of me what you told him. You said: “I have found that the ideas that—the great ideas that I’ve been concerned with are Western ideas. I think it is—I think I’m talking not about the great ideas of world culture, which doesn’t exist yet, but the great ideas of Western culture. I have to admit that this is parochial.” (“Truth”) You were not at your most coherent. Perhaps at your most impassioned?

ADLER: Perhaps.

ANGEL: Maybe most defensively impassioned?

ADLER: ... Perhaps.

That exchange between Professor Mortimer J. Adler and Bill Moyers occurred at Aspen, where the 1981 Executive Seminar on “Truth” (a Great Idea, one of six finalists) had come to flash point, Adler having incautiously put on notice an Indonesian academic named Soedjatmoko. Viewers of this fall’s PBS series “Six Great Ideas,” in which a vociferous group of diplomats, academic administrators, and other thinkers thrashed about in a sea of speculations, will remember the exchange. Mr. S. had tried to deflect “the search for truth” toward “the search for meaning,” and Adler, aware that Mr. S. was hinting at Eastern vs. Western meaning, laid down with staccato emphasis a stern agenda:



“I’m going to hold you to the question of whether or not when we talk about human rights, there are statements that are true or false about human rights, transculturally.” [“Truth”]

That was too much for Jamake Highwater, an engaging American Indian half Adler’s age with a Who’s Who entry, for what that’s worth, already two lines longer. (“ . . . to dispel long-standing stereotypes of Indians,” it states as part of his mission.) “You are using truth as a weapon,” said Highwater. “Fourteen people are having very little input because your concept of truth limits what we are able to say.”

Highwater next cited a racial slur from the 1928 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which Adler (since 1974 chairman of the Britannica’s board of editors) was quick to disavow; whereupon Highwater (“That isn’t my point”) said what his point was: that the concept of truth as Westerners have perpetuated it—“ultimate, fixed, singular”—“has upheld all of the most negative aspects of the Western relationship with other cultures”: missionaries, for instance; coerced salvation. “And we’re doing it again here today.” Adler mentioned the conquest of Mexico as something available for objective discussion. Highwater bridled at the very phrasing: “conquest,” indeed: “invasion.” And when the British historian Lord Alan Bullock thought they could at least agree on its date, 1519, Highwater denied even that. It didn’t happen in 1519 at all. “It happened in the year One Reed”: a different concept of time, a different concept of space. So what is Truth, unless the weapon of the victor?

Before long Adler was “having a great difficulty in agreeing with all of you, because I really do agree with almost everything that’s been said, and yet you will not allow me to do it.” It was from his quandary that PBS mercifully cut away to the Mort and Bill Show: Mort A. and Bill M. seated on a log in front of the timeless Rockies, chatting about something low-key: whether there can be true and false knowledge. (No, there can’t; when it’s not true it’s opinion.)

ANGEL: Truth. It was Pilate who asked, “What is truth?” Could you have enlightened him?

ADLER: If only I had been there. “Truth,” I would have told him, “is an agreement or correspondence between the mind and reality.” I would have had him study page 37 of my book *Six Great Ideas*.

ANGEL: Should Pilate, I wonder, have attended an Aspen Executive Seminar? And would his attendance have forestalled the crucifixion? He asked, "What is truth?" on hearing Jesus say, "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." Try to plug your definition into that puzzlement. "Everyone who is of the agreement between the mind and reality..." Jesus seems not to have heeded your definitions. He even said, "I am the truth."

ADLER: Meaningless.

ANGEL: Do not bang the desk.

ADLER: I always bang the desk. It is my emphasis.

ANGEL: True. We have on file much PBS footage of you banging the desk. Behind you, as you bang, in shot after shot, an Op art tapestry afflicts the eye like a polychrome test pattern. It helps you at your most intense look benignly placid. The angel who invented Op art is no longer with us, but centuries ago I had one of his creations in this office. Higher Authority removed it after it had so upset a client named Rembrandt he commenced to gibber and was compassionately translated to Heaven when I had hardly begun my interrogation.

ADLER: That seems precipitate.

ANGEL: You must imagine him gibbering in Dutch. The fountains of the great deep were astir with the reverberations.

ADLER: In Dutch. But Dutch is Western. There are Great Ideas in Dutch.

ANGEL: Are you at home in Dutch?

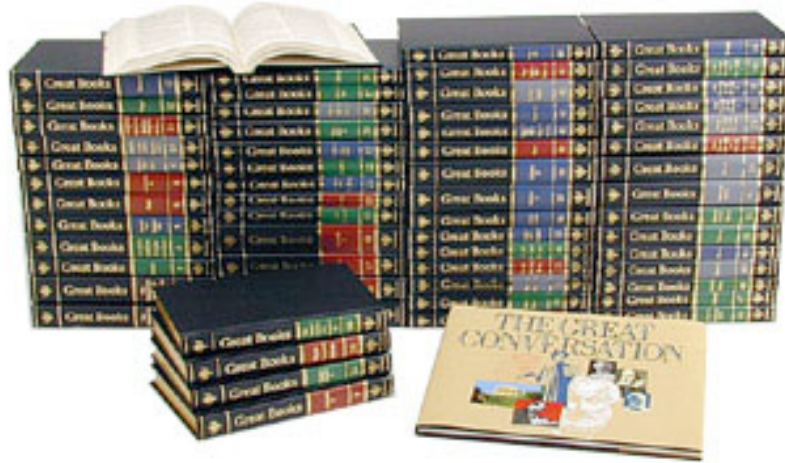
ADLER: No, but it stands to reason...

ANGEL: Pah, reason. (He consults the Rolodex.) I see that you commenced (1943) to codify the 102 Great Ideas in the 443 Great Works by the 74 Great Authors. By 1952 the set was on sale, equipped with your General Index, the *Syntopicon*. It has sold mightily, notwithstanding that Kung Fu-tse (Confucius to you) was among the missing. Not Western; even though it was from his China, via reports of French Jesuits, that Western nations received an idea they have come to cherish more than they cherish Truth: a bureaucracy literate enough (alas) to read its own regulations. But

let that pass. You did list Homer as one of your authors. Did you offer your customers Homer?

ADLER: In Volume Four . . .

ANGEL: In Volume Four, *Great Books of the Western World*, I find only pages of execrable translatores. You offered that as Homer? This goes badly, Dr. Adler. (There are two telephones on the desk, a red and a blue. His hand is moving toward the red.)



ADLER: (quickly): Ah, the Problem of Translation. I gave a whole page (Volume Three, page 1291) to that problem. Another lifetime I might well devote to the 102 Great Problems. (He brightens.) Might we make a deal?

ANGEL: No, no plea-bargains here. A second lifetime is out of the question. Though I am aware that Reincarnation, if not a Great Idea, was great enough to sponsor eight *Syntopicon* references to Plato, not to mention one to *Moby Dick*. Do not look surprised. Your *Syntopicon*, all 2,428 pages, is much thumbed in this office.

ADLER: That is very flattering....

ANGEL: Not at all, not at all. Our junior clerks amuse themselves with its naiveté's. Here, for instance, under Wealth 10a ("The nature of wealth as a good: its place in the order of goods and its relation to happiness") we are referred to *Othello* I. iii, where the villainous Iago keeps saying, "Put money in thy purse." Is the customer to take that for a great mind's pronouncement on a great idea?

ADLER: (humbly): Debatable, I concede. But consider the scale. The *Syntopicon* contains 163,000 references. Our staff of 175 went through all 443 books four times. We assigned six ideas a week. We made 900,000 decisions. We included as well the seventy-seven books of the Bible, and Additional Readings to the extent of 2,603 titles by 1,181 authors. It all cost—



ANGEL: I know, a million dollars. Numbers do not impress us here. Any of us—my office boy, in fact—can call up the infinite digits of transcendental pi in the interval between shelling a peanut and ingesting it.

ADLER: (sternly): Aha, I am no longer sure you are even an angel. Angels do not ingest peanuts. Behold in me the twentieth century's authority on angels. In *The Angels and Us* (1982, \$11.95)

ANGEL: No commercials, please.

ADLER: ... I point out that angelic bodies, on the occasions when angels assume them, "cannot perform any of the vital functions that properly belong to living organisms."

ANGEL: Please do not bang the desk. And do not suppose that uniting one's essence to the essence of a peanut need be a bodily act. Here, where there is no marrying or giving in marriage, here we ingest—the word is metaphor—the Essential Peanut, miraculously multiplied.

This year's *The Angels and Us* lists eighteen other Adler titles since 1927. It's an incomplete list; the *Syntopicon* itself is missing. They are none of them books for specialists. He has been a resolute educator; *Aristotle for Everyone* (1978) is subtitled *Difficult Thought Made Easy*, and ways of making thought easy entail not just cutting corners but assuring your reader that "philosophy is everybody's business." This means: if we are going to talk about Justice, as we do, day-to-day, we need to know how to talk about Justice, an unwobbling concept, not an elastic bag. The bullying some seminar participants have resented issues from Adler's insistence that for the duration of their talk the word under the spotlight shall not slither or mutate. "Justice" can never mean "fulfillment of my passions," however altruistic one's passions.

He does cut corners, as in a throwaway line about "Plato's wish to expel poets and painters from the ideal state because their portrayal of the gods so grievously misrepresents them." The amount of learned controversy that sentence cuts short has filled many books, notably Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato*, which argues that what upset Plato about poets was that the poets he knew were prior to books. There were only Great Books after there were books, when much shaping of the Western mind had already happened. Plato, by Havelock's account, represented the new literacy, poets such as Homer, the old illiteracy, which you ingested by letting it possess you—memorizing the words, dancing out their tempo: swaying and chanting, in the grip of the god. The fastidious Plato thought that unphilosophical.

And no god grips you in the filing-card universe of Mortimer Adler's writings, where difficult thought is made easy, if sometimes tedious. There it suffices that Homer shall be tamed to a prose that stirs no pulses, while fine-tooth combs locate ideas in Hector's speeches. Here abstractions hold still the way marks do on a blackboard. What made the six PBS broadcasts lively was something absent from the books, the complex tug of particular passions in a room alive with spoken discourse.

Justice: would a guarantee that you could get away with it ease your problems about acting unjustly? Plato proposed an example: a ring that could make you invisible, that would let you get away with anything you wanted. So the question went round the seminar: if you saw that ring in Tiffany's window, price unstated but said to be "moderate," would you: a) go in and price it? b) buy it? c) use it?

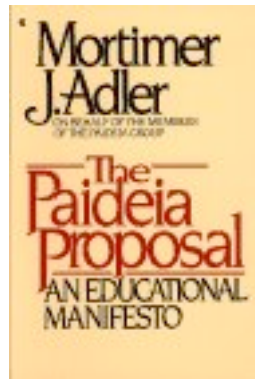
Physicist, judge, lawyer, entrepreneur, one by one they temporized. Someone even spoke of buying the ring to destroy it. But Ruth Love, Chicago's superintendent of schools, saw no problem at all. She'd, by golly, use it. How? "To get rid of all the unjust laws . . . unjust by my definition."

ADLER: "You'd need to be invisible to do that?" Ms. Love: "No, but it might help sometimes." (laughter) ["Justice"]

In great good humor, Adler refrained from pronouncing her radically ineducable. TV showed an Adler readers would barely recognize. Alert, ingratiating, witty—was this the editor of the relentless *Syntopicon*? This the director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, where in thirty years they have only made a start on repackaging "the whole realm of the great ideas"—so far "two volumes on the idea of freedom; one volume each on the ideas of justice, happiness, love, progress, and religion; and a monograph on the idea of beauty"? That such books will help save mankind is a notion so high-minded it verges on self-parody. Ideas, ideas: no tang of the particular. Outside his books, away from the scriptoria where acute ears catch no sound save fifty pens scratching, Adler proved a master diplomat of particularity.

But at the Aspen of voices, persons, particularities, what becomes of ideas? Each participant wanted to describe the view from his window, and when Adler framed topics and held them to the framing, you could guess from their faces how at any moment some felt they were politely playing a game. "An intellectual game we

are playing,” said Mr. Soedjatmoko at one point, and Mr. Highwater spoke of “sticking with the rules.” [“Beauty”] If people don’t do that, they brawl, as Earl Weaver can testify, and seminar leaders, like umpires, can give high priority to a brawl-free two hours. The unwanted implication is apt to be that definitions have no other utility.



What utility, for that matter, have the prescriptions in Adler’s other 1982 offering, *The Paideia Proposal*? One more high-minded committee job, it prescribes for the desperate state of American education, grades one through twelve, in terms as difficult to disagree with as they seem impossible to implement. Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, has supplied what must be the funniest blurb of the year: “If to some it seems to go overboard, it goes overboard in the right direction.” Chicago’s Ruth Love thinks it’s a dandy book too. So do Gus Tyler (assistant president of the ILGWU), Benjamin Mays (president emeritus, Atlanta Board of Education), and William Friday (president, University of North Carolina). Such a chorus of packaging experts is instructive.

Save for one gritty specific—all electives should be abolished, since “allowing them will always lead a certain number of students to voluntarily downgrade their education”—not a thing in the Proposal’s eighty-four earnest pages will disquiet any school administrator. Most will purr; isn’t this what I’ve always said we were doing?

Adler’s love of numbered lists seems tailor-made for glib reports to trustees. “Three different ways in which the mind can be improved” are “1) by the acquisition of organized knowledge; 2) by the development of intellectual skills; and 3) by the enlargement of understanding, insight, and aesthetic appreciation.”

Reading that sympathetically in context, setting it beside classroom reality in, say, East Baltimore, you can just glimpse its revolutionary intent. It is even safe to pretend that it can help change a bad world (“truly a manifesto,” coos Ms. Love), safe because its potential for igniting anything is slight, educators having co-opted its jargon long ago. That is a political fact, of a kind seemingly hidden from discussants of Great Idea Number Twenty (Education). In his eightieth year, still fighting a good fight, Mortimer Adler tempts

the melancholy judgment that his chief effect, as he translates the lessons of 2,600 Western years into easy American, may be to make them seem finally irrelevant.

ANGEL: *Six Great Ideas*; six, or 102, no matter. And 900,000 decisions: I like that touch. The American obsession with numbers, the Western obsession with categories, engender in their fatal marriage the remorseless packager. “Great Ideas of Western Man: one of a series”: that was the caption on a long run of advertisements that I keep in my file of Awesome Vacuities. A series of unmemorable high-minded clichés, each illustrated by a prominent unheard of artist, it was sponsored for years and years by the Container Corporation of America, to the end (a cynic would say) that Americans might stand reverently holding their hats, all facing one way for the pickpocket’s greater convenience. I perceived less difference than I should like between their enterprise and yours.

No, Dr. Adler, no, for all your fervor, what have you not trivialized? And yet for no trivial end. There is much to be said for you. You will not permit thought to be reduced to the firing of neurons. You will not suffer auto repair to be called education. In an age of the categorical denial of meaning, in the age of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, you have insisted that there can be meaning—stable, immutable, as hard as this desk. And the day you talked to him of Goodness, you wrung whole minutes of consecutive sense from Bill Moyers . . . I am getting old at this work. Back when the morning stars were singing together, I made my thousands of decisions with élan. Now I scarcely ever know which telephone to pick up.

ADLER: (quickly): The blue one.

ANGEL: Hush; you do not know what you are saying. (A long pause.) I have decided. Your eternity shall be unique.

ADLER: Not ... (he gropes for the worst) an eternity of culling the Great Thoughts of John Dewey?

ANGEL: No. An eternity at this very desk. You are a packager. So am I a packager. Heaven, Hell, those are packages. Our appearance, even, is not unlike. I shall change my pace for an eon. I shall descend and run the Aspen seminars. You shall sit here and catechize the clients.

ADLER: With the files? The Rolodex? The video archive?


ANGEL: With all of it. You will find it comes naturally. I must tell you, though, the secret of the telephones. Red, blue, it does not matter: mere decor. Both go to the one Dispatcher. What matters is not which you pick up but the word you say: you say merely “Los Angeles,” or “Kalamazoo.”

ADLER: Los Angeles. Ah, of course: Heaven.

ANGEL: Your blind trust in categories! For once consider reality. No, for the deserving, seasons and Michigan air. But for the rest of men, in their infinitely greater number, an eternity of smog and issue-less freeways.

ADLER: (speechless): . . .

ANGEL: (donning halo and reaching for wings): I am off. Do not bang the desk, it is rickety. Be assured, by the way, that time is of no moment here. Reconstructing the next client may take an eternity. I have left the Rolodex open at his card. (In a blue flash he is gone.)

Adler (rubs his eyes, seats himself on catechist’s side of desk. Moving his astonished lips, he commences to bone up on the next client): Derrida, Jacques. b. Algiers, 1930... 

Published in Harper’s December 1982. Hugh Kenner teaches at Johns Hopkins University and is the author of many books.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Grant Liddle

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