

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Aug '05

Nº 334

There is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves.

—Margaret Thatcher



THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY: A SWAN SONG

Mortimer J. Adler

The last great book in political theory—a work that stands in the line of Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Marsilius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Montesquieu, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel—was published in 1861, a little more than a hundred years ago. John Stuart Mill's *Representative Government* has, in addition to its intrinsic greatness, the distinction of being the first major work in political philosophy which, addressing itself, as is appropriate to a treatise in

political philosophy, to the question of the ideally best form of government, answers that question by a fully reasoned and critically cautious defense of the proposition that democracy is, of all forms of government, the only one that is perfectly just—the ideal polity.

At the time that Mill wrote *Representative Government*, democracy in his sense of the term—constitutional government with universal suffrage operating through elected representatives—did not exist anywhere in the world. Republics there were and constitutional monarchies, but all of them were oligarchies of one type or another: the ruling class—the enfranchised citizenry in the republics or the citizenry and the nobility in the constitutional monarchies—comprised only a small fraction of the population. The rest were disfranchised subjects or slaves.



Nor had democracy, in Mill's sense, ever existed in the whole of the historic past. From the beginnings of constitutional government in the city—states of Greece right down to Mill's day and beyond that into the twentieth century, the republics which went furthest in the direction of popular government were all oligarchies, in which “the people”—the constituents of the government, the enfranchised citizens—formed a privileged ruling class, rising above the subjects and slaves who formed the rest, usually the majority, of the population. In the Athens of Pericles, where what Aristotle would have regarded as an extreme form of democracy prevailed for a short time, the citizens numbered 30,000 or less in a population of 120,000.

We should certainly not allow ourselves to be distracted or confused by the fact that the Greeks invented the name “democracy” and used it, either invidiously for mob rule as Plato did or descriptively as Aristotle did for a form of government which, as contrasted with oligarchy, set a much lower property qualification for citizenship and public office. The democracies of the ancient world differed from the oligarchies only in the degree to which participation in government was restricted by property qualifications for citizenship and public office—which could result, as it did in the case of Athens, in the difference between a democracy of 30,000 and an oligarchy of 500. However significant that difference must have seemed to the 30,000, it could hardly have had any meaning for the 90,000 disfranchised human beings who, in Aristotle's terms, were useful parts of the political community, but not mem-

bers of it.

We have no reason to complain about how the Greeks used the word “democracy,” but it is disingenuous, to say the least, for contemporary writers to use it as a synonym for “popular government,” and then make that term applicable to any form of government in which some portion of the population—the few, the many, or even all except infants, idiots, and criminals—participate somehow in the political life of the community. By that use of the term, anything other than an absolute monarchy is a democracy in some degree, more or less, according to the proportion of the population that forms “the people”—the ruling class. According to such usage, “democracy” in Mill’s sense of the term is merely the limiting case in the spectrum of popular governments, the case in which the people is co-extensive with the population, excepting only those who, as Mill says, are disqualified by their own default. We are then compelled to say that the Greek oligarchies were simply “less democratic” than the Greek democracies; and that modern democracies became more and more democratic as the working classes and finally women were granted suffrage. It would take the semantic sophistication of a six-year-old to recognize that this is a use of words calculated to obscure problems and issues rather than to clarify them.

It can be said, of course, as it has been, that democracy in Mill’s sense represents an ideal which, through the course of history, diverse forms of constitutional government have been approaching in various degrees; and hence, to whatever extent they are popular—to whatever extent “the people” is an appreciable fraction of the population—they are entitled to be called “democratic” by virtue of their tending to approximate the ideal. But to say this is worse than confusing. While it may be poetically true to describe the course of history as tending toward democracy as the political ideal, it is simply and factually false to attribute that tendency to our ancestors as if it were the manifestation of a conscious intention on their part. Democracy, in Mill’s sense, was not the ideal to which the past aspired and toward which it strove by political revolutions or reforms. With the possible and qualified exception of Kant, no political philosopher before Mill ever argued for the inherent or natural and equal right of every human being to be a citizen actively participating in the government of his or her community; none regarded it as an ideal; none, in fact, even contemplated the possibility of a genuinely universal suffrage.

In the sphere of political action, as distinct from that of political thought, Mill did have some predecessors, such as Colonel Rain-

borough and Sir John Wildman among the Levellers in Cromwell's army; Mr. Sandford and Mr. Ross in the New York Constitutional Convention of 1821; Robert Owen in the formation of the community at New Lanark and similar communities elsewhere. But even in the sphere of practical politics, Mill is the first to advocate the enfranchisement of women and hence the first to conceive universal suffrage as including the other half of the population.

The prior uses of the term "democracy," both descriptive and denigrative, should not prevent us from perceiving what is genuinely novel in the political conception for which Mill appropriated the term. (1) It involves an adequate appreciation of the full extent to which universal suffrage should be carried on the grounds of a right to participate in government, a right inherent in every human being. Hence, (2) it regards constitutional government with truly universal suffrage as the only completely just form of government—the ideal polity.

In what follows, I shall be exclusively concerned with this new conception which, under any other name, would be exactly the same. Since no other name, nearly as appropriate, is available, I shall use "democracy" in Mill's sense of the term, hoping that the reader will remember why, *when the term is used in that sense*, nothing prior in theory or practice can be called "democracy" or "democratic." Anyone, of course, is privileged to use words as he pleases, but that privilege does not justify obfuscation or confusion in their use.

My main purpose in this paper is to consider the question: Under current and future conditions, is democracy *possible*? Is government by the people *practicable* in the world as it is today and as it is likely to become? Or to state this still another way: *Can* the people participate through suffrage in the government of a modern state?

There is, of course, a prior question: *Should* they? *Should* all human beings, as a matter of right and duty, actively participate in the political affairs of their community? If political democracy is not, as a matter of right and justice, the ideal polity, then why waste time concerning ourselves about its practical feasibility?

One might also ask, Do the people—or most people—really *want* to participate in government, or would they, as a matter of fact, rather concern themselves exclusively with their private affairs while someone else takes care of the business of government? This question is, in a sense, a subordinate part of the question about

whether democracy is practically feasible; for certainly one major obstacle to its being effectively practiced would be a general indifference to political affairs on the part of most people. That indifference, if it exists, would have to be overcome by education or other means if democracy is to become effectively operative.

Let us return to the primary question: Is democracy the ideal polity—the most just, the only completely just, form of government? I share Mill's affirmative answer to this question. My explication of the answer, which I cannot attribute wholly to Mill, can be briefly stated as follows:

There are three principles or elements of political justice. (1) Government is just if it acts to serve the common good or general welfare of the community and not the private or special interests of those who happen to wield political power. By this principle, tyrannical government, exploiting the ruled in the interests of the rulers, is unjust; and, by this same principle, a benevolent despotism can be to some extent just.

(2) Government is just if it is duly constituted; that is, if it derives its powers from the consent of the governed. The powers of government are then *de jure* powers, and not simply *de facto*: we have a government of laws instead of a government of men. By this principle, constitutional governments of all types have an element of justice lacked by all absolute governments; by this criterion, an absolute monarchy, however benevolent the despotism, is unjust.

(3) Government is just if it secures the rights inherent in the governed, *i.e.*, the natural, and hence the equal, rights which belong to men as men. Among these rights is the right to liberty, and of the several freedoms to which every man has a natural right, one is political liberty—the freedom possessed by those who have some voice in the making of the laws under which they live. When political liberty is thus understood, only men who are citizens with suffrage enjoy political liberty. The unenfranchised are subjects who may be ruled paternalistically or benevolently for their own good, but who are also unjustly treated in so far as they are deprived of a natural human right. By this principle, every constitutional oligarchy is unjust, and only a constitutional democracy is just.

The last of these three principles is the critical one, the one that is essential to democracy. With the exception of tyranny, other forms of government may have certain aspects of justice, but only democracy, in addition to being constitutional government and gov-

ernment for the common good, has the justice which derives from granting every man the right to participate in his own government. This right needs a word or two more of explanation.

Like every natural right, this one is rooted in the nature of man. Its authenticity rests on the truth of the proposition that man is by nature a political animal. To affirm this proposition is to say that *all* men, not just some men, should be *constituents* of the government under which they live and so should be governed only with their own *consent*, and that in addition, they should be citizens with *suffrage* and be thus empowered to *participate* in their own government. (I have italicized all the crucial words in the statement of the proposition's meaning.)

It was Aristotle, of course, who said that man is by nature a political animal, but he himself denied one of the crucial elements in the proposition's meaning when he also said that some men are by nature slaves; for to assert that some men have natures which fit them only for slavery (*i.e.*, naturally incapable of participating in government) directly contradicts the proposition that all men are by nature political (*i.e.*, fit to participate in government).

To accommodate modern ears, let me translate Aristotle's remarks about natural slavery into the proposition that some men are intended by nature (*i.e.*, by their endowments at birth) to be governed for their own good and for their own good should be deprived of any voice in their own government. If this proposition is true, then political democracy could hardly claim to be the ideal polity. It has no special justice in excess of that possessed by a constitutional oligarchy, administered for the benefit of those subject to its rule. In fact, it might even be said to involve a certain injustice, in so far as it gives political power to those who *should not* have it—all those who are not by nature fit for suffrage. In short, *only if all men are by nature political animals*—only if all are naturally endowed to live as free or self-governing men—do all have the right to be enfranchised citizens and the duty to participate in government. Only then is democracy, of all forms of government, supremely just.

This is not the place to argue the truth of the central proposition or of its contradictory. But we ought to spend a moment considering what the best form of government would be *if only some men are by nature political animals*. Would the "some" be a small or a large proportion of the population? Would they be the few or the many? Undoubtedly, the few. These, then, should comprise a political elite, a corps of officials, a professional bureaucracy that

should govern the people at large for their own good. So far we have a benevolent despotism; but if we now add (1) that the government should be duly constituted (*i.e.*, should be constitutional or limited rather than absolute—a government of laws) and, (2) that, except for the political distinction between the official ruling class and the rest of the people, an equality of social and economic conditions should prevail (*i.e.*, all men should equally share in the general welfare that the government aims to promote), and (3) that the government should safeguard, equally, the private rights and liberties of each individual or family, then what we come out with is the kind of government recommended by certain commentators on the present political scene; *e.g.*, Bertrand de Jouvenel, with a fondness for Gaullism, or Walter Lippmann, with nostalgia for Platonism.

Such a form of government can appropriate to itself the name “democracy” by appealing to Tocqueville’s sociological rather than political conception of democracy as a society in which a general equality of conditions prevails. Equality of conditions can, as Tocqueville recognized, tend toward completely centralized totalitarian government, more oppressive than any ancient despotism; but if a community retains the limitations and checks of constitutional government, and if the general welfare that is promoted by the government includes the protection of the private rights and liberties of the people, then, perhaps, it does deserve to be called, as De Jouvenel calls it, a “social democracy.” But it is not a political democracy; for while the community enjoys government *of* and *for* the people, government *by* the people has been replaced by the rule of a professional bureaucracy (which, it is hoped, comprise the few who are by nature competent to govern).

A “social democracy,” thus conceived, might very well be the best—the most just—form of government *if it were true that only some men are by nature political animals*. But if the contradictory proposition is true—*if all are*—then it involves the same essential injustice that is to be found in any benevolent despotism. As Mill helps us to see, what is pernicious about the idea of the good and wise despot—in all the forms that it has taken from Plato to De Gaulle—is not the myth that any one man or any few actually have the superior qualities that merit putting the government entirely in their hands; the point is rather that, granted such men can be found, letting them rule, with wisdom and benevolence, reduces the rest of the population to a perpetual childhood, their political natures stunted rather than developed. By the standards of wisdom, efficiency, or competence in government, political democracy may not compare with the excellence in government that can be achieved

by a specially qualified bureaucracy; but if all men deserve political liberty because they have a right to a voice in their own government, then government by the people must be preserved against all the tendencies now at work in the opposite direction—and for one reason and one alone, its superior justice.

The question remains: Can it be preserved?

In the hundred years since Mill wrote *Representative Government*, a small number of political democracies have come into existence for the first time in history, most of them since the turn of the century and most of them in Europe or North America. This is not to say that the ideal polity has been actually and fully realized on earth in our time. Far from it! What came into existence in our time were the legal enactments—the constitutional provisions or amendments—which established the form of democratic government in a small number of political communities. But in most cases—most notably, perhaps, in the United States—the discrepancy between democracy on paper and democracy in practice was vast at the beginning and has nowhere yet become negligible.

If significant inequality of conditions, if educational deficiencies, if the obstinate persistence of privileged minorities, on the one hand, and the failure to eradicate underprivileged minorities, on the other, prevent the effective operation of democratic institutions, then the full realization of democracy still belongs to the future, even in the politically most advanced countries. Nevertheless, one might have been cautiously optimistic twenty years ago, as I was, in thinking that the future belonged to democracy, that the general direction of change in the conditions of human life promised not only the legal institution of democracy where it did not yet exist, but also a slow and steady progress toward its fuller realization in practice wherever it did exist. It looked as if Tocqueville were right in thinking that “an aristocracy cannot again be founded in the world” and that “the nations of our time cannot prevent the conditions of men from becoming equal”; and therefore right in predicting that “the gradual development of equality of conditions” is inevitable.

It looked, in other words, as if all of Mill’s fears about “the infirmities and dangers to which representative government is liable” would gradually be made groundless by the social and economic changes that have been taking place since his day. While advocating the extension of the suffrage to the laboring classes (because it was clearly unjust “to withhold from anyone, unless for the prevention of greater evils, the ordinary privilege of having his voice

reckoned in the disposal of affairs in which he has the same interest as other people”), he feared that the enfranchised masses would exercise their new-found power in their own factional interests and tyrannically subjugate the upper class minorities to their will. He also feared that the judgment of the uneducated would prevail, by sheer weight of numbers, over the judgment of their betters to the detriment of the community as a whole.

The marked inequality of conditions which, in Mill’s day, separated the working masses from the upper classes and brought them into a sharp conflict of factional interests led Mill, the proponent of democracy, to have the same fears about it that led others to oppose it. And, let it be said in passing, that the remedies—proportional representation and plural voting—which Mill proposed as ways of safeguarding democracy from its own deficiencies would as effectively have nullified democracy in practice, if they had been carried out, as the devices proposed by James Madison or John Calhoun to prevent the will of the numerical majority from prevailing. To be in favor of universal suffrage (which makes the ruling class co-extensive with the population) while at the same time wishing somehow to undercut the rule of the majority, is as self-contradictory as being for and against democracy at the same time.

This is not to say that the problems which concerned Mill were not genuine in his time. These problems—especially the problem of factions (the age-old conflict between the haves and the have-nots) and the problem of an educated electorate—can be solved, not in the way that Mill, or Madison, or Calhoun, proposed, but only through the development of a general equality of conditions, which, by gradually substituting a classless society of haves for a class-divided one, tends to reduce and ultimately to eliminate the conflict of economic factions; and which also, by gradually giving all equal access to schooling and enough free time for leisure and learning in adult life, enables every educable human being (*i.e.*, all except the incurable feeble-minded or insane) to become educated to the point where he can be as good a citizen—as sensible in the exercise of his suffrage—as anyone else.

All men are not equally intelligent at birth; nor will all ever become equally wise or virtuous through the development of their minds and characters; but these ineradicable inequalities in human beings do not in themselves undermine the democratic proposition that all normal men are educable enough to become good citizens. To think otherwise is to revert to the aristocratic proposition that some men are so superior to others in natural endowment that they

alone are educable to the extent required for participation in government. I am not saying that the problem of producing a sufficiently educated electorate (when it is co-extensive with the population of the community) has yet been solved. It certainly has not been, and we are still a long way from solving it. I am only saying that the changes which have taken place since Mill's day—especially the technological advances which have brought affluence and ample opportunity for learning and leisure in their wake—give us more hope that it can be solved than he could possibly have summoned to support his wavering democratic convictions.

Herein lies one of the paradoxes of the present situation. The same technological advances which have created relatively affluent societies for the first time in history, and without which it would have been impossible to effect all the social and economic reforms that have tended to create a greater equality of conditions, are now made the basis for despair about the feasibility of democratic government. Again and again, in discussions conducted by the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, for instance, it has been said that government by the people is no longer possible, because, in our technologically advanced societies, the problems of government have become so complex that neither the people themselves nor their elected representatives in congress or parliament can contribute to their intelligent solution. It has been suggested that, if not now, then certainly in the foreseeable future, decision-making will have to be taken over by computers and by the experts who know how to program them.

Government by the people may have been a feasible polity in ancient Athens when the *few* who constituted the citizenry met in the agora and debated questions of policy which they could understand and think about in terms of the relatively simple state of facts with which they were generally acquainted. It may even have made some sense in certain countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the significant citizenry were still a very small portion of the population and when their elected representatives in congress or parliament could still have understood the questions they debated and have had some command over the facts relevant to reaching decisions. But now that the citizenry is, in effect, the whole population—now that, at last, we have constitutional democracy with universal suffrage—most of the basic questions which confront a twentieth-century government can no longer be intelligently debated, much less decided, by the public at large or even by representative assemblies.

There are other sources for the current despair about the feasibility of democratic government—if that is really taken to mean participation in government by the whole population through voting and through other ways of expressing their views on public policy, either directly or by pressure on their representatives. One is the ever-increasing size of the population and the intricately complicated and ever-changing conditions under which the enlarged population now lives and struggles to form a community. Another is a series of studies of the voting process, made in recent years by social scientists, which tends to confirm the worst suspicions of antidemocrats concerning the folly of supposing that the voters pay any attention whatsoever to the real public issues involved in an election when, in fact, they merely express their emotions or their prejudices at the polls. Still another is a mathematical analysis of voting which leads to the conclusion that the principle of majority rule does not work when the voters are presented with more than two alternatives.

One could go on, either to spell out in detail the sources of despair about democracy or to add many others of similar vein, but that is not necessary in order for us to face the fact that today the prevailing opinion among the learned—the professional students of sociology and politics—is that a realistic approach to the processes of government leads to the conclusion that the ideal of democracy, as Mill envisioned it, is simply a misleading myth. Even if democracy were ideal in terms of the principles of justice (a matter which most of the learned no longer deign to discuss, or else dismiss as the kind of loose talk in which only philosophers indulge), it does not now have and probably never can have any reality in the world of things as they are.

Since I am only a philosopher—and also a relatively ignorant man with regard to the current state of learning in the behavioral and social sciences—I cannot assess the validity of the conclusion just stated in terms of the evidence or considerations on which it is based. Such questions as: *Does democracy now actually exist to any degree?* or *Under present and future conditions, is the realization of democracy highly improbable?* are questions of fact. I do not know the answers to these questions; and, being a philosopher, I suspect that no one else does either. I also doubt, as any philosopher would, that such questions can be answered demonstratively. The answers to them always remain in the sphere of opinion and are always likely to be subject to reasonable differences of opinion in the light of all the evidence that can be gathered.

Confronted with the opinion about democracy that is now preva-

lent among the learned, at least among those of realistic persuasion, a philosopher is impelled to ask questions.

Let me begin by assuming the truth of the realistic denial in its most extreme form; *i.e.*, let us assume the *impossibility* of government by the people in any sense which tends to realize, in some degree, the ideal of democracy. What then?

First, must we not conclude that the ideal is a purely visionary utopian one, not based on men or conditions as they are? For if it were a practicable ideal, based on things as they are, then how could it be impossible of realization—in the strict sense of impossible? Those who thus eliminate democracy as a practicable ideal must therefore be asked whether they have any genuinely practicable (*i.e.*, actually realizable) political ideal to substitute for it. If they say no, they must be further asked whether the reason is that they reject normative political thinking entirely and so refuse to take the question seriously. In that case I, as a philosopher, have no interest in questioning them any further. But if they concede the possibility of sensible and reasonable talk about good and bad forms of government, and hence are seriously concerned with thinking about the best of all possible (*i.e.*, realizable) forms, then they should either have some alternative to democracy as the ideal polity or be in search of one. In either case, they must be asked to state the standard, principle, or norm in terms of which they would propose a particular form of government as best, or better than some other. Justice? Wisdom? Efficiency? Strength? If they appeal to any standard other than justice, or do not include justice among the principles to which they appeal, I must remind them that democracy is said to be the best form of government only in terms of justice, not in terms of wisdom, efficiency, strength or any other criterion; and so they have failed to find a substitute for democracy. If they then reply that justice is totally irrelevant to the goodness of government, I either have no more questions to ask them or too many to set forth here.

Let me turn next to a milder form of the current despair about democracy—to the view that the difficulties in the way of realizing it are now very great and, the way things are going, are likely to become even greater in the future. Let us assume that this is true. However great they are or are likely to become, they cannot be regarded as insurmountable; for that would throw us back to the extreme position that government by the people is impossible. Here we have only two main questions to ask.

The first is addressed to those who are so deeply impressed—and

claim to be so sorely distressed—by all the difficulties which now loom up and stand in the way of making democracy work, especially the difficulty that arises from the complexity of the problems which governments now face, a complexity that seems to place them beyond the competence so far manifested by the electorate or by representative assemblies, or any degree of competence that might reasonably be expected of them in the near future. I must, in passing, warn our friends not overstate this difficulty lest it become insurmountable and we be once more thrown back to the extreme view that democracy is impossible. If they heed this warning and continue to concede that democracy is practicable, however difficult putting it into practice may be, then I would like to ask them whether they also concede that it is the ideal polity. My question, I must remind them, is not about democracy in *any* sense of that term, but about democracy as defined: constitutional government with genuinely universal suffrage, operating through elections and elected representatives, with majority rule, and under conditions of social and economic as well as political equality. Do they regard democracy thus defined as the ideal polity, and if they do, do they hold it up as the ideal by reference to principles of justice?

If they answer this compound question with a double affirmative, then there is only one further question to ask. Let me assume that they take the view that the difficulties confronting democracy—if not now then certainly in the future—are likely to be so great that, even if they are not, absolutely speaking, insurmountable, we may nevertheless be unable to overcome them in any really satisfactory manner. Hence, they may say, we should prepare ourselves for this eventuality by thinking of a second-best form of government, one which, while less just, would be more workable because it would get around the difficulties now besetting democracy. What shape would that take?


I do not know whether there is more than one possible answer to this question; but I do know, and have already mentioned (see page 36), one alternative to democracy that is espoused by those who wish to discard government by the people while retaining government of and for the people. I am even willing to concede that if political democracy should prove to be impossible, then so-called social democracy may very well be a second-best. But I am not yet willing to yield—and I see nothing in the contemporary discussion of the difficulties of democracy which requires me to yield—on the proposition that all men are by nature political. I must, therefore, repeat what I said earlier; namely, that, men being what they are, “social democracy” is a poor second-best, for it imposes upon the many who are disfranchised the essential injustice which charac-

terizes any benevolent despotism. Hence, until—as nearly as possible demonstrably—insurmountable difficulties force us to surrender all hope in democracy and for its future, we should be loath to settle for anything less than the best form of government that befits the nature of man.

Until then, the only course for us to follow—with courage and intelligence—is the one outlined by Robert M. Hutchins in a recently published conversation in which he engaged with Joseph P. Lyford on the subject of man the political animal.

Summing up, Mr. Hutchins said, “The Center [The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions] is committed to constitutional democracy. Its reasons lie in the nature of man. Man is a political animal. It is unjust to deprive him of his political life.” He then went on to say in conclusion:



The task of those who are committed to political democracy is to discover how democracy can work in a technical, bureaucratic society in which all problems appear to be beyond the reach, to say nothing of the grasp, of the citizen. The task calls for more than haphazard thoughts and random discussions and the dusting off of ancient but irrelevant slogans. It requires a prodigious effort of the best minds everywhere to restore the dialogue that is the basis of the political community. Above all, the effort calls for faith that, whatever the defects of our society, self-government can and must endure because it is the only form of rule consistent with the nature of man. 

“The Future of Democracy: A Swan Song” from *Humanistic Education and Western Civilization: Essays for Robert M. Hutchins*, edited by Arthur A. Cohen, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964, 30-43.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

RE: Great Ideas from the Great Books

Max,

I wanted to let you know that I’m happy the Center’s distributing portions of this book.

As I mentioned before, aside from *How to Read a Book*, it's probably one of the best and shortest representations of Adler's mind, goals, and priorities. It's quite remarkable that each piece began as a newspaper column.

Tim Lacy

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

Homepage: <http://www.thegreatideas.org/>

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

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