

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Dec '05

Nº 352



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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

## PART IV

### Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books

#### 45. THE ART OF TEACHING

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We all remember teachers who have had a great effect on us in school or in college. But we find it hard to put our finger on just what it is that they transmitted to us and how they did it. All the talk on education today does not seem to shed any light on the art of teaching. What is it that goes on in the relation between teacher and student? What does the teacher do, and what happens to the student?*

W. G.

*Dear W. G.,*

Socrates gives us a basic insight into the nature of teaching when he compares the art of teaching to the ancient craft of the midwife. Just as the midwife assists the body to give birth to new life, so the teacher assists the mind to deliver itself of ideas, knowledge, and understanding. The essential notion here is that teaching is a humble, helping art. The teacher does not produce knowledge or stuff ideas into an empty, passive mind. It is the learner, not the teacher, who is the active producer of knowledge and ideas.

The ancients distinguish the skills of the physician and the farmer from those of the shoemaker and the house builder. Aristotle calls medicine and agriculture *cooperative* arts, because they work with nature to achieve results that nature is able to produce by itself. Shoes and houses would not exist unless men produced them; but the living body attains health without the intervention of doctors, and plants and animals grow without the aid of farmers. The skilled physician or farmer simply makes health or growth more certain and regular.

Teaching, like farming and healing, is a cooperative art which helps nature do what it can do itself—though not as well—without it. We have all learned many things without the aid of a teacher. Some exceptional individuals have acquired wide learning and deep insight with very little formal schooling. But for most of us the process of learning is made more certain and less painful when

we have a teacher's help. His methodical guidance makes our learning—and it is still ours—easier and more effective.

One basic aspect of teaching is not found in the other two cooperative arts that work with organic nature. Teaching always involves a relation between the mind of one person and the mind of another. The teacher is not merely a talking book, an animated phonograph record, broadcast to an unknown audience. He enters into a dialogue with his student. This dialogue goes far beyond mere "talk," for a good deal of what is taught is transmitted almost unconsciously in the personal interchange between teacher and student. We might get by with encyclopaedias, phonograph records, and TV broadcasts if it were not for this intangible element, which is present in every good teacher-student relation.

This is a two-way relation. The teacher gives, and the student receives aid and guidance. The student is a "disciple"; that is, he accepts and follows the discipline prescribed by the teacher for the development of his mind. This is not a passive submission to arbitrary authority. It is an active appropriation by the student of the directions indicated by the teacher. The good student uses his teacher just as a child uses his parents, as a means of attaining maturity and independence. The recalcitrant student, who spurns a teacher's help, is wasteful and self-destructive.

Speaking simply and in the broadest sense, the teacher shows the student how to discern, evaluate, judge, and recognize the truth. He does not impose a fixed content of ideas and doctrines that the student must learn by rote. He teaches the student how to learn and think for himself. He encourages rather than suppresses a critical and intelligent response.

The student's response and growth is the only reward suitable for such a labor of love. Teaching, the highest of the ministerial or cooperative arts, is devoted to the good of others. It is an act of supreme generosity. St. Augustine calls it the greatest act of charity.

## 46. THE FORMATION OF HABITS

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*We hear so much about the power of habit in human life. William James says it is "the flywheel of society," and Aristotle calls it "second nature." But what is this powerful influence called "habit"? And why is it so important in our lives?*

B. H.

Dear B. H.,

Let me begin by explaining Aristotle's famous statement that habit is second nature. Habits are additions to the nature with which we are born. We are born with the power or ability to act in certain ways and also with certain innate patterns of action, which are called instinct or reflexes. Our innate tendencies to action can be developed and formed by what we actually do in the course of living. Such developments or formations are habits.

For example, we have an innate capacity for a great many different kinds of action in which skill can be acquired by practice. We learn to talk grammatically; we learn to think logically; we learn to cook or drive a car; we learn to ice skate or play tennis. In each case the learning results in an acquired skill which is a habit. In each case the habit *actually* gives us an ability which was only *potential* in us at birth.

That is why Aristotle calls habit second nature. Our original nature consists of capacities which can be developed or perfected by learning or experience. The development or perfection of those capacities supplements our original nature and thus constitutes a "second"—an added or acquired—nature.

Our need to form habits arises from the fact that, unlike the lower animals, we are not born with instinctive patterns of behavior adequate for the conduct of life. What certain animals can do instinctively, we have to learn to do. Instincts are, in a sense, *innate* or natural habits, just as human habits are *acquired* or second nature.

Our original nature—our innate equipment—is fixed for life, though it is subject to modifications of all sorts. The habits we form, which modify our original nature, also have a certain stability, though they, too, are subject to alteration. We can strengthen our habits, weaken them, or break them entirely and supplant them by others. Like our original nature, our second nature—our repertoire of habits—gives each of us the particular character he has at a given stage of life. If you know a man's habits, you can predict with some assurance what he is likely to do.

So far we have been talking about the individual. Common habits of thought and action in a community, the "ways" of a people, are usually called customs. Custom keeps things on an even keel in a society. It enables the common life to go on harmoniously. It smoothes the way for interchange between individuals and holds

them together. We never feel at home in a new place until we've become accustomed to its customs and made them our own.

That is what William James means in calling habit "the enormous flywheel of society, its most precious conservative agent." (A flywheel by its inertia keeps the engine going at a uniform speed and compensates for torque.)

James applies this insight to social status as well as to personal habits. He says that our occupational mannerisms become so set by the time we are thirty that most of us become perfectly satisfied with our place in life and our function in the social machine. James also insists that our personal tastes, and our habits of speech, thought, and social behavior, are relatively fixed by the time we are twenty, so that we are kept in our social orbit by a law as strong as gravitation.

However, it is important to remember that it is never impossible to shake off an old habit and form a new one. Once a habit has been acquired, it has almost compulsive power over us. But human habits are freely acquired by the choices we make, and can be got rid of and replaced by making other choices. No habit, no matter how strong, ever abolishes our freedom to change it. This is the lesson of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (or *My Fair Lady*), a delightful dramatization of the power to change habits. Liza Doolittle can and does learn to speak like a lady.

#### 47. WHAT MAKES A BOOK GREAT?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*What makes a great book great? Does literary style, profound thought, or universal appeal make some books better than others? Is it the best seller or the rare and difficult book that will best stand the test of time?*

*G. T. H.*

*Dear G. T. H.,*

Great books are those that contain the best materials on which the human mind can work in order to gain insight, understanding, and wisdom. Each in its own way raises the recurrent basic questions which men must face. Because these questions are never completely solved, these books are the sources and monuments of a continuing intellectual tradition.

Carl Van Doren once referred to great books as “the books that never have to be written again.” They are the rare, perfect achievements of sustained excellence. Their beauty and clarity show that they are masterpieces of the fine as well as of the liberal arts. Such books are justifiably called great whether they are books of science, poetry, theology, mathematics, or politics.

The richness of great books shows itself in the many levels of meaning they contain. They lend themselves to a variety of interpretations. This does not mean that they are ambiguous or that their integrity is compromised. The different interpretations complement one another and allow the reader to discover the unity of the work from a variety of perspectives. We need not read other books more than once to get all that they have to say. But we can always go deeper into great books. As sources of enlightenment, they are inexhaustible.

The interest in many good books is limited to a definite period of history. They do not possess the universal appeal that results from dealing with the fundamental questions which confront men in all times and places and in a way that men in all times and places can understand. Great books, on the contrary, transcend the provincial limits of their origin. They remain as world literature. The ones we are sure are great are the ones men everywhere turn to again and again through the centuries.

In view of this, it is often said that great books must pass the test of time. This is quite true. But it is not the passage of time that makes the books great. They were great when they were written. An enduring interest in a book merely confirms its greatness. We may consider some contemporary books great, but we cannot be sure. Their excellence still remains to be proved before the tribunal of the ages.

Mark Twain once remarked that “the great books are the books that everyone wishes he *had* read, but no one *wants* to read.” People wish they had read them because they are the indispensable material of a liberal education. They shy away from reading them because these books require thought. And thinking is hard. It is probably one of the most painful things that human beings are called upon to do.

The great books are not easy to read. No one should expect to understand them very well on a first reading, or even to master them fully after many readings. I have often said that they are the books which are over everyone’s head all of the time. That is why they

must be read and reread. That is also why they are good for us. Only the things which are over our head can lift us up.

Like all the other good things in life, what the great books have to offer is hard to get. But it is precisely because great books are difficult that they are more readable and more worth reading than other books. It is precisely because they raise problems which they do not finally answer that they can provoke us to think, inquire, and discuss. It is precisely because their difficulty challenges our skill in reading that they can help us to improve that skill. It is precisely because they often challenge our accepted prejudices and our established opinions that they can help us to develop our critical faculties.

The difficulty of these books comes not from the fact that they are poorly written or badly conceived, but rather from the fact that they are the clearest and simplest writing about the most difficult themes that confront the human mind. They deal with these themes in the easiest possible way. Therein lies their greatness.

#### **48. CAN CHILDREN READ THE GREAT BOOKS?**

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*You have long been beating the drum to attract adults to read the great books. What about children, whose education is one of our main responsibilities? Can they read the great books with any profit? At what age or grade would you suggest that they start reading the great books? Or are they just too difficult for children to understand?*

*O. J. H.*

*Dear O. J. H.,*

We can begin to understand some of the great books at a fairly early age, for instance, stories from the Bible, parts of *Gulliver's Travels*, passages from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We grow in our understanding of these and other great books throughout our life. A mature human being, whose mind has been deepened and broadened by all the trials and experiences of life, can obviously understand the great books better than a callow child. But it is an advantage to begin the process of liberal learning in youth, before mental habits become ossified and the young adult has become used to accepting tenth-rate substitutes for real literature and

thought. It is never too late to learn, but it is also wise to begin as early as possible.

I have recently helped prepare a guide to the great books for children from twelve to eighteen, or roughly from the seventh to twelfth grades. This guide is intended as a reading plan for use by parents and children together, but the proposals it makes may help to answer your question about reading the great books in school.

The plan is divided into three basic stages, corresponding to the age and grade level of the child. The first stage is for seventh- and eighth-graders, children from twelve to fourteen. The second stage is for ninth- and tenth-graders, the fourteen-to-sixteen group. The third stage is eleventh- and twelfth-graders, youth from sixteen to eighteen.

Let me tell you what the selections are, and you can decide whether they are too difficult for youngsters on the subteen and teen-age levels. In the first stage, children begin with a selection from the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus tells the exciting story of his journeys and adventures. Then they dip into the Biblical book of Proverbs for its practical wisdom on the good life. Next they listen to Herodotus telling his fascinating stories about ancient Egypt and Persia. Then they read a passage from Plato's *Republic*, in which Socrates discusses right conduct. They go next to the delightful story of Gulliver among the little people of Lilliput, in *Gulliver's Travels*. They finish with a reading from the basic American state papers: the Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution.

The second-stage readings are a bit more ambitious, as they should be for the high-school student. They include selections from Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

The third-stage readings, for the precollege group, include Plato's *Apology* and Sophocles' *Antigone*, and selections from Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*, Augustine's *Confessions*, J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*, and William James's *Principles of Psychology*.

Such lists provide balanced menus of interesting and worthwhile readings, suitable for both children and adults, and understandable at the stage for which they are offered. Now, of course, such difficult books require a real exercise of the child's mind. He must stretch his intelligence and imagination. They constitute a challenge to think and learn, and children will rise to the test. They like



to show how well they can do in a new activity. They can't always stay in the playpen, and they don't want to.

The age or grade to start such selected readings in the great books varies with the particular school, family, and child. The main thing is to get the child started early in the right reading habits and attitudes. If we let children get used to so-called easy-reading books with bright-colored pictures and clever page setups, they will be reluctant when they are adolescents or older to make the necessary effort to read good books. They will accept worthless pap instead of going after good, solid food for their minds.

The result could be a generation of physically mature men and women with undeveloped minds and emotions, completely unprepared for the responsibilities and decisions of adult life. Prophetic modern writers, such as Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, have painted horrible pictures of a future society in which men's minds are regulated by mass communications and reflexes conditioned through various technological devices. The great writings of our tradition provide vital cultural resources which may prevent such prophecies from being fulfilled. Our children and our children's minds are the first line of defense in this coming struggle for power over the human spirit.

#### 49. HOW TO READ A DIFFICULT BOOK

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*To tell you the truth, I find the so-called great books very difficult to read. I am willing to take your word for it that they are great. But how am I to appreciate the greatness in them if they are too hard for me to read? Can you give me some helpful hints on how to read a hard book?*

*I. C.*

*Dear I. C.,*

The most important rule about reading is one I have told my great books seminars again and again: In reading a difficult book for the first time, read the book through without stopping. Pay attention to what you can understand, and don't be stopped by what you can't immediately grasp. Keep on this way. Read the book through undeterred by the paragraphs, footnotes, arguments, and references that escape you. If you stop at any of these stumbling blocks, if you let yourself get stalled, you are lost. In most cases you won't

be able to puzzle the thing out by sticking to it. You have a much better chance of understanding it on a second reading, but that requires you to read the book *through* for the first time.

This is the most practical method I know to break the crust of a book, to get the feel and general sense of it, and to come to terms with its structure as quickly and as easily as possible. The longer you delay in getting some sense of the overall plan of a book, the longer you are in understanding it. You simply must have some grasp of the whole before you can see the parts in their true perspective—or often in any perspective at all.

Shakespeare was spoiled for generations of high-school students who were forced to go through *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, or *Macbeth* scene by scene, to look up all the words that were new to them, and to study all the scholarly footnotes.

As a result, they never actually read the play. Instead, they were dragged through it, bit by bit, over a period of many weeks. By the time they got to the end of the play, they had surely forgotten the beginning. They should have been encouraged to read the play in one sitting. Only then would they have understood enough of it to make it possible for them to understand more.

What you understand by reading a book through to the end—even if it is only fifty per cent or less—will help you later in making the additional effort to go back to places you passed by on your first reading. Actually you will be proceeding like any traveler in unknown parts. Having been over the terrain once, you will be able to explore it again from vantage points you could not have known about before. You will be less likely to mistake the side roads for the main highway. You won't be deceived by the shadows at high noon, because you will remember how they looked at sunset. And the mental map you have fashioned will show better how the valleys and mountains are all part of one landscape.

There is nothing magical about a first quick reading. It cannot work wonders and should certainly never be thought of as a substitute for the careful reading that a good book deserves. But a first quick reading makes the careful study much easier.

This practice helps you to keep alert in going at a book. How many times have you daydreamed your way through pages and pages only to wake up with no idea of the ground you have been over? That can't help happening if you let yourself drift passively through a book. No one ever understands much that way. You must have a way of getting a general thread to hold onto.

A good reader is active in his efforts to understand. Any book is a problem, a puzzle. The reader's attitude is that of a detective looking for clues to its basic ideas and alert for anything that will make them clearer. The rule about a first quick reading helps to sustain this attitude. If you follow it, you will be surprised how much time you will save, how much more you will grasp, and how much easier it will be.

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Jean-Robert Antoine**

**Adithya Vasudevan, Switzerland**

[We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.](#)

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## 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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