

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART IV

Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books

50. WHY READ THE GREAT BOOKS OF ANTIQUITY?

Dear Dr. Adler,

Why read great books that deal with the problems and concerns of bygone eras? Our social and political problems are so urgent that they demand practically all the time and energy we can devote to serious reading. Is there any value, besides mere historical interest, in reading books written in the simple obsolete cultures of former times?

W. R. B.

Dear W. R. B.,

People who scorn the study of the past and its works usually assume that the past is entirely different from the present, and that hence we can learn nothing worthwhile from the past. But it is not true that the past is entirely different from the present. We can learn much of value from its similarity and its difference.

A tremendous change in the conditions of human life and in our knowledge and control of the natural world has taken place since ancient times. The ancients had no prevision of our present-day technical and social environment, and hence have no counsel to offer us about the particular problems we confront. But, although social and economic arrangements vary with time and place, man remains man. We and the ancients share a common human nature and hence certain common human experiences and problems.

The poets bear witness that ancient man, too, saw the sun rise and set, felt the wind on his cheek, was possessed by love and desire, experienced ecstasy and elation as well as frustration and disillusion, and knew good and evil. The ancient poets speak across the centuries to us, sometimes more directly and vividly than our contemporary writers. And the ancient prophets and philosophers, in dealing with the basic problems of men living together in society, still have something to say to us.

I have elsewhere pointed out that the ancients did not face our problem of providing fulfillment for a large group of elderly citizens. (See Chapter 75.) But the passages quoted from Sophocles and Aristophanes show that the ancients, too, were aware of the woes and disabilities of old age. Also, the ancient view that elderly persons have highly developed capacities for practical judgment and philosophical meditation indicate possibilities that might not occur to us if we just looked at the present-day picture.

No former age has faced the possibility that life on earth might be totally exterminated through atomic warfare. But past ages, too, knew war and the extermination and enslavement of whole peoples. Thinkers of the past meditated on the problems of war and peace and make suggestions that are worth listening to. Cicero and Locke show that the human way to settle disputes is by discussion and law, while Dante and Kant propose world government as the way to world peace.

Former ages did not experience particular forms of dictatorship that we have known in this century. But they had firsthand experience of absolute tyranny and the suppression of political liberty. Aristotle's treatise on politics includes a penetrating and systematic analysis of dictatorships, as well as a recommendation of measures to be taken to avoid the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.

We also learn from the past by considering the respects in which it differs from the present. We can discover where we are today and what we have become by knowing what the people of the past did and thought. And part of the past—our personal past and that of the race—always lives in us.

Exclusive preference for either the past or the present is a foolish and wasteful form of snobbishness and provinciality. We must seek what is most worthy in the works of both the past and the present. When we do that, we find that ancient poets, prophets, and philosophers are as much our contemporaries in the world of the mind as the most discerning of present-day writers. Some of the ancient writings speak more directly to our experience and condition than the latest best sellers.

51. WHAT ARE THE GREAT IDEAS?

Dear Dr. Adler,

What are these "great ideas" that you are always talking about? I read somewhere that you have collected the hundred great ideas in the history of human thought. What are some of these ideas? Which of them have had the most effect on our thinking?

M. W.

Dear M. W.,

The “great ideas” are the basic ideas treated by the great writers of the Western tradition. In the period after World War II, I directed the selection and analysis of these fundamental concepts and their collection into two thick volumes entitled *The Great Ideas*. These volumes are included in the set of great writings, from Homer to Freud.

My colleagues and I found 102 basic ideas in these writings, starting alphabetically with ANGEL and ending with WORLD. These are the concepts that have been at the center of thought and action in the twenty-five centuries or so of our civilization.

You want to know which of the great ideas have exerted the most influence. One way to answer your question is to tell you which of the hundred-odd great ideas are most discussed by writers of the great books. We can assume that the amount of space devoted to the discussion of an idea gives an approximate measure of how much thought has been bestowed on it. The five most-discussed ideas are GOD, KNOWLEDGE, MAN, STATE, and LOVE, in that order.

Another way of answering your question is to look for the “core” ideas, around which other ideas gather, as around a nucleus or a sun. These “core” ideas are representative of clusters or constellations of other ideas. They point to the most significant objects of human concern.

Let’s take the idea of GOVERNMENT, for example. Around it cluster the ideas of various forms of government: ARISTOCRACY, DEMOCRACY, MONARCHY, OLIGARCHY, and TYRANNY. Connected with it are such ideas as CONSTITUTION, CITIZEN, LAW, REVOLUTION, and STATE. These ideas mark out the sphere of political thought and action.

Or consider the idea of VIRTUE. It is the core of a whole set of ideas about particular virtues: COURAGE, JUSTICE, PRUDENCE, TEMPERANCE, and WISDOM. In addition, it is closely related to many other ideas, such as GOOD AND EVIL, HAPPINESS, DUTY, PUNISHMENT, SIN. All these together constitute a set of ethical ideas.

We can similarly construct a set of psychological ideas, centering in MAN. It includes DESIRE, EMOTION, EXPERIENCE, HABIT, MEMORY AND IMAGINATION, MIND, PLEASURE AND PAIN, REASONING, SENSE, SOUL, and WILL.

Some of the great ideas, such as EVOLUTION, LANGUAGE, and PROGRESS, have come to the front in the last hundred years.

They are among the most influential and most discussed ideas today, but they were not always so: On the other hand, there are ideas which were of much greater interest to earlier writers than they are to more recent ones; for example, ANGEL, FATE, PROPHECY, and SOUL.

The foregoing enumerations are far from exhaustive. No doubt, I have omitted a few ideas which you consider important, even if they are not the five greatest or most influential. I can think of a few like that myself, such as BEAUTY, BEING, CAUSE, EDUCATION, FAMILY, LIBERTY, LABOR, MATTER, SPACE, TIME, TRUTH, WAR AND PEACE, and WORLD.

No matter which are the greatest, all these ideas are basic for our thought and action. They are involved in any real encounter with the world or with other persons. If we want to think about anything or talk about it with one another, we must use these ideas. Without them we are blind and lost.

PART IV: *Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books*

RECOMMENDED READINGS

In *Great Books of the Western World*

Plato: *Republic*, Books III, VII; *Meno*; *Protagoras*; *Laws*, Book VII; *The Seventh Letter*

Aristotle: *Politics*, Books VII, VIII

Marcus Aurelius: *The Meditations*, Book I

Augustine: *The Confessions*, Books I–III; *On Christian Doctrine*, Books II–III

Montaigne: *Essays*, “Of Pedantry,” “Of the Education of Children,” “Of Vain Subtleties,” “Of Books”

Rabelais: *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Book I, Chs. 14–24

Bacon: *The Advancement of Learning*

Descartes: *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*; *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason*

Milton: *Areopagitica*

Montesquieu: *The Spirit of Laws*, Book IV

Smith: *The Wealth of Nations*, Book V, Ch. 1, Part 3, Article II

Marx: *Capital*, Ch. 15, Sections 3, 9. (3a)

James: *Principles of Psychology*, Ch. IV

Freud: “The Sexual Enlightenment of Children”

Note: See also the first three volumes of *Great Books of the Western World*: Vol. 1, *The Great Conversation: The Substance of*

- a Liberal Education; Vols. 2, 3, The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*
- Nietzsche, Friedrich: *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions; Thoughts Out of Season*, III. "Schopenhauer as Educator"
- Richards, Ivor Armstrong: *How to Read a Page; Interpretation in Teaching*
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques: *Emile, or Education*
- Russell, Bertrand: *Education and the Good Life*
- Van Doren, Mark: *Liberal Education*
- Veblen, Thorstein B.: *The Higher Learning in America*
- Whitehead, Alfred N.: *The Aims of Education*

Other Works

- Aquinas, Thomas: "Concerning the Teacher" (*Summa Theologica*, Part II—II, QQ. 166—167)
- Arnold, Matthew: *Culture and Anarchy; Essays in Criticism*
- Augustine: *Concerning the Teacher*
- Bacon, Francis: *Essays*, "Of Custom and Education," "Of Studies"
- Barzun, Jacques: *The Teacher in America; The House of Intellect*
- Buber, Martin: *Between Man and Man*, III. "Education," IV. "The Education of Character"
- Castiglione, Baldassare: *The Book of the Courtier*
- Comenius, Johannes A.: *The Great Didactic; The School of Infancy*
- Conant, James B.: *Education and Liberty*
- Dewey, John: *Democracy and Education; The School and Society; Experience and Education*
- Erasmus, Desiderius: *On Liberal Education; The Education of a Christian Prince*
- Flexner, Abraham: *Universities*
- Harvard Committee: *General Education in a Free Society*
- Hutchins, Robert M.: *The Higher Learning in America; Education for Freedom; The University of Utopia; The Conflict in Education*
- Maritain, Jacques: *Education at the Crossroads*
- Martin, Everett Dean: *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*
- Meiklejohn, Alexander: *The Liberal College; The Experimental College*
- Mill, James and J. S.: *On Education*
- Mill, John Stuart: *Autobiography*
- Montessori, Maria: *The Montessori Method*
- National Education Association: *Education for Work, Citizenship, and Leisure*
- Newman, John Henry: *The Idea of a University*

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Dr. Arthur Hanna

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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