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## A GUIDEBOOK TO LEARNING

For the Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom

Mortimer J. Adler

TO

JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET

*whose understanding of the humanities as  
the cure for the barbarism of specialization  
inspired the establishment of the  
Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies*

## Note to the Reader

I can think of no better way to start readers off than to tell them plainly what lies ahead.

This I can do most effectively by quoting here the opening paragraphs of Chapter 13.

I can imagine that some readers who have been patient and persistent enough to reach this point will be somewhat perplexed. They are likely to be wondering what all they have been through adds up to and what comes next.

That state of mind on the part of readers may help me to achieve the objective I had in mind in writing this book.

I have given in the preceding pages a survey of the state of learning in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in modern times. In my judgment it was necessary for readers to become acquainted with the traditional maps or charts of learning in those periods, so as to appreciate their need for clarification and their need for guidance as to the state of learning in the contemporary world. Such guidance is not to be found in the literature of this subject.

The contribution, which I believe this book makes, consists in providing needed philosophical insights and distinctions that enable us to lay out the geography, as it were, of the realm of learning. I venture to say that readers will find nothing comparable to it elsewhere. My reason for surveying the literature from antiquity to the present day was to allow readers to judge for themselves whether I have succeeded in my effort to throw light in dark corners. I also hope they will find the recommendations I offer in the Conclusion of this book helpful as guidelines for self-conducted learning in the mature years of their lives.

I suggest that readers examine the Contents to see what lies ahead, and that they ponder the following statement by Aristotle, which they will find again on the title page of Part Two.

It is necessary to call into council the views of our predecessors in order that we may profit by whatever is sound in their views and avoid their errors.

I think I have done what Aristotle recommends; and I hope that, by my doing so, readers will find in the closing chapters of this book the enlightenment they seek.

M. J. A.

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## **Introduction: Who Needs Guidance and Why**

THIS book is intended for all who have gradually come to understand what young persons, still in school, college, or university, do not know and find difficult to understand. For the most part, their teachers also fail to acknowledge the point in question. It is that no young person can complete his or her education in school, college, or university for the simple reason that youth itself—immaturity—is an insuperable obstacle to becoming a truly educated human being while still young.

One's education can be begun in institutions but it can never be completed there. Only a truly mature or adult person can possibly attain the kind of education that produces generally cultivated human beings, men and women who feel at home in the whole world of human knowledge, know their way around in it, and have the kind of understanding of basic ideas, issues, and values, together with some modicum of wisdom, that everyone should aspire to possess.

A recent report on college offerings and student choices voices the complaint that the elective system with its ever increasing specialization of courses offered and the tendency of students to choose

lines of specialization that promise immediate rewards in the marketplace, has resulted in the neglect of studies essential to the general cultivation of the mind. The report insists that for the latter purpose “some things are more important to know than others.

Schooling that is general rather than specialized, liberal rather than vocational, and humanistic rather than technical, should prepare the young for continued learning in adult life, after all schooling has been completed, without which this aspiration cannot be fulfilled and this attainment achieved. While this is not the only goal of schooling, it is certainly its most important objective.

Since everyone has a natural human right to aspire to become a truly educated person in the later years of life, the kind of schooling that serves this purpose should be accessible to everyone. That is why twenty two persons, who joined with me in recommending a radical reform in our system of basic schooling, proposed that general, liberal, and humanistic education should start at the level of basic schooling, and should be supplemented to a modest extent in our highly specialized colleges and universities. Only in this way can all be properly prepared, some more than others, for the continued learning that all should attempt to carry on in adult life in order to complete their education.

Since our basic schooling up to the present is far from being the kind of schooling recommended in *The Paideia Proposal*, everyone stands in need of the help that this book tries to provide. If they are to become truly educated human beings, they must embark on the sea of learning in adult life.

To set out on such a voyage without charts and maps is to be without a point of departure, an appointed destination, lacking knowledge of currents, of reefs and shoals, of depth and shallows, of distances and directions.

I have called this work a guidebook precisely because it attempts to provide something like a chart or map for the journey that everyone should undertake with the hope of finally reaching the understanding and wisdom that is the beckoning goal and culmination of the effort.

In antiquity, in the great centuries of the medieval era, and in modern times up until the end of the nineteenth century, the sea of learning was mapped and charted for those who wished to venture on voyages of exploration and discovery.

Ours is the century of the knowledge explosion. We are living in what has been called the information society. We are suffering from what Jose Ortega y Gasset has called “the barbarism of specialization,” which dismisses a generalist approach to the world of learning as amateurism. It also finds a merely alphabetical ordering of the specialized parts of knowledge more congenial than any attempt to present a general scheme for the organization of knowledge.

Whatever merits and demerits such schemes may have had in earlier centuries, they were certainly appropriate to the state of affairs that then existed. They served the purpose for which they were constructed; but they are no longer appropriate today. They are viewed by us as relics or antiques in the museum of intellectual cartography.

We must overhaul and redraft them to make them useful. Short of doing that, we are without charts or maps. No comprehensive chart or map of the vast expanse of learning that lies before us is available for our use. In this century of the knowledge explosion and in our information society it is paradoxical, to say the least, that we should lack what earlier centuries had when there was so much less knowledge to be explored and organized.

Where would anyone now turn to find a comprehensive outline of knowledge or a schematic diagram of the arts and sciences and of other disciplines as well? Certainly not to the catalogues of schools, departments, and courses in our great universities. Certainly not to most of the encyclopedias that can be found on the shelves of libraries, and sometimes in our homes as well.

Let me explain my reference to university catalogues and general encyclopedias as two prime examples of the plight we are in. They are alike in two respects: they are both alphabetically organized, and each in its own way purports to cover the whole scope of knowledge or learning.

The word “university” echoes the word “universe”—an all inclusive whole in which everything can be found. The very word “encyclopedia” promises to provide the great circle (encyclo) of general learning (paideia) that every cultivated human being should possess.

Indications of everything to be studied and learned are there in some fashion. But in what order, to what extent, of what value, for what purpose? That is not indicated at all. Nor is there any indica-

tion of lines of connection and separation that might enable us to plot or plan different ways of starting out, carrying on, and ending up if we wish to undertake a voyage of exploration and discovery, one that, if it is begun in youth, must continue throughout adult life.

To remedy this deficiency, I propose to proceed as follows. In Part One, I will use the alphabetical ordering of subjects in general encyclopedias and the alphabetical ordering of courses in university catalogues to present the bewildering chaos that confronts us. I will supplement this by considering card catalogue systems used for organizing books on the shelves of great libraries.

In Part Two, I will report, explain, and criticize the charts and maps of learning that we have inherited from the past. Readers will see why they must be amended and extended to be of service to us today. Then, in Part Three, I will call attention to contemporary efforts to do something about remedying the encyclopedic affliction I have called alphabetiasis.

Finally, I will present, in Part Four, the indispensable insights and distinctions that give us the guidelines to learning appropriate for us today. With these distinctions in mind, I think I can turn the chaos we face into a more orderly picture, one that will enable me to suggest an itinerary for a lifelong pursuit of wisdom. That I have attempted to do briefly in the Conclusion.

## **PART ONE**

### **ALPHABETIASIS: FROM A TO Z**

## CHAPTER 1

# The Merits and Demerits of Alphabetical Arrangements

NOT all languages have alphabets, but the Indo European languages that do have them confer certain benefits upon the peoples that speak these languages.

The most obvious purpose to which alphabets have been put to use is in the arrangement of large assemblages of items, such as the names in a telephone book, the words in a standard dictionary, the entries in an index, and the cards in a library catalogue. Their alphabetical arrangement provides an easy mode of access for anyone who wishes to find a particular item the initial letter of which is known.

An alphabetical ordering of items facilitates all look-it-up-to-find efforts. In most of the examples mentioned above no other ordering would serve that purpose, or serve it as well. In fact, any other ordering of the words in a dictionary or the entries in an index would amount to randomness.

The reason for this is that one cannot find, applicable to these materials, any principles or criteria for assorting, relating, and ordering them. No inherent intelligible connection exists between one item or set of items and another.

One other type of ordering is similar to alphabetizing an assemblage of items. That is a chronological ordering, which is useful, for example, in making a list of recommended readings by listing the books in the chronological order of their authors' lives. Doing this enables one to avoid any and all judgments about the scale of importance on which the books recommended might be arrayed.

Both alphabetical and chronological ordering exempt us from having to make value judgments. We are especially grateful for this if we fear, as many do, that making such judgments is likely to be tendentious or attributable to our purely personal prejudices.

There is still a further advantage to be gained by employing the alphabet or dates to arrange an assemblage of items. Not only are

we exempt from having to make value judgments about the items being considered, but also we are free from the burden of having to think about what inner connections among them might suggest a significant pattern of their relationships to one another.

Alphabetization is particularly applicable to the items we find in reference books. But when it is also applied to the articles in a general encyclopedia or to the departments of learning in a university catalogue we are compelled to ask whether resorting solely to the alphabet is not an intellectual dereliction.

The immediate negative reply might be that an encyclopedia like a dictionary, or a university catalogue like a catalogue of library index cards, is after all just a reference tool something to be used for look it up purposes only. A moment's reflection challenges that too easy answer.

A great general encyclopedia is not just a reference book. It is also an instrument of learning in the same way that a great university is an institution of learning. Inherent in the things to be learned we should be able to find inner connections that might enable us to discover a significant pattern of their relationships to one another.

We might even dare to construct a scale of values according to which we can judge their importance to us as things to be studied and learned. Instead of evading that challenge by saying nothing is more important to know than anything else, we should be willing to make judgments that scale the parts of knowledge from the less to the more important.

Not to do so where it is possible is an evasion of intellectual responsibility. Doing so does not necessitate abandoning an alphabetical ordering of the same materials for look it up or reference purposes. I would certainly not advocate a totally nonalphabetical encyclopedia, devoid of any use as a reference book; nor would I suggest that university catalogues be different from what they are now.

I am only saying that both need and deserve to be supplemented by an ordering that is more significant and intelligible than the one provided by alphabetization, which is no more significant or intelligible than a purely random array.

I have coined the word "alphabetiasis" to name the intellectual defect that consists in refusing to go beyond the alphabet where go-



ing beyond it is possible. It is strictly a modern malaise, more widespread in the twentieth century than at any earlier time.

Our universities invite us to embark on the sea of learning, but without charts and maps that might guide us in our progress or that might give us some significant direction in which to proceed. The same holds true, with a very few exceptions, of our great encyclopedias.

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