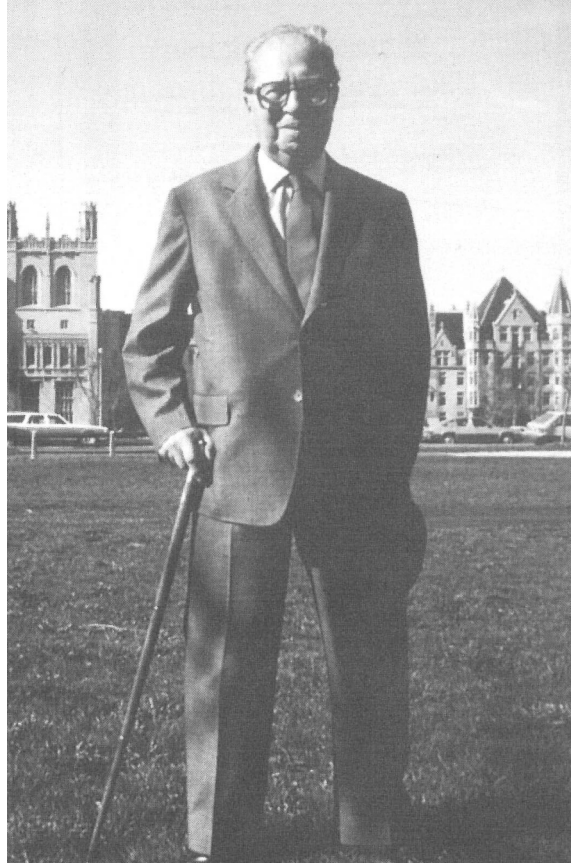


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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A GUIDEBOOK TO LEARNING

For the Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom

Mortimer J. Adler

CHAPTER 4

Libraries

It has been said that it is the mission of the wise man, or of his less than *alter ego*, the philosopher, to judge the value of things and to order them according to their merit. Resorting to the alphabet as an organizing principle avoids making the judgments antecedent to an ordering that reflects relative worth, importance, or significance. It is an abdication of wisdom and philosophy, all for the sake of convenient reference.

In the chapters of Part Two, we shall consider how philosophers—ancient, medieval, and modern—have performed their ministry in the name of wisdom. But before we come to that, we must look at one more unphilosophical approach to the problem of structuring the whole world of learning, putting its parts in significant relation to one another.

The approach I have in mind is that of librarians engaged in the task of classifying the books they must put on their shelves in some orderly way. Alphabetizing them by reference to the initial letter of the author's name would certainly not do; nor would it be useful to arrange them chronologically by date of publication. Such an alphabetical or chronological organization sometimes occurs in cataloguing the books in a library, but not in a system of classification.

Encyclopedias, universities, and libraries have a certain similarity. All three, when they attain a certain magnitude, claim to be covering the whole sphere of what is known, the whole realm of human learning at a given time. A great encyclopedia covers it by articles that survey and expound the parts and parcels of that whole, a great university by the courses it offers, and a great library by the books it puts on its shelves.

This parallelism might suggest that all three would organize those parts and parcels in the same way. As we have seen, this is true of encyclopedias and catalogues of university courses. Both employ the alphabet, but libraries do not.

We do not know in what order the manuscript papyri were laid out in the great library of Alexandria that was burned to the ground by the Romans when they invaded Egypt in the first century B.C. But it would be reasonable to suppose that it was probably in accordance with Aristotelian principles. The same might be said of the great libraries of Salamanca and Toledo in Moorish Spain in the Middle Ages. Here, too, the ordering principles would probably

have been derived from the Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, both followers of Aristotle.

When we come to libraries that, after Gutenberg, first put printed books on shelves, it would again be reasonable to expect that the ordering principles adopted by libraries would follow the scheme for the organization of knowledge to be found in Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. In the modern world, certainly in its early centuries, Bacon replaced Aristotle as the organizer of knowledge.

Bacon's scheme in brief (we shall deal with it at greater length later) was based on a threefold division of the human faculties at work in the products of the mind, certainly in the production of books. Named in an ascending order, they are memory, imagination, and reason. History and biography, for example, belong in the sphere of memory; poetry and fiction belong in the sphere of the imagination; and all the sciences, or parts of philosophy, belong in the sphere of reason.

When Thomas Jefferson built a library for himself at his home in Monticello, Virginia, and shelved his own collection of books there, he put them in an order that corresponded to Bacon's scheme. Jefferson's library later became the nucleus of the Library of Congress. The threefold division of books proposed by Bacon necessarily required a great many subdivisions in order to accommodate the immense variety of books that fell under each of the main categories. With forty-four subdivisions added, the classification scheme of the Library of Congress remained unchanged from Jefferson's time until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was completely revised. That undertaking, begun in 1901, was completed in 1910.

Here is the Library of Congress's cataloguing plan as it stands today. I have omitted the category of reference books (encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc.), that heads the list. Under some of the main categories I have indicated examples of what are included as subordinate classes of works.

Philosophy

Geography, including
Travel and Physical
Geography

Psychology

Religion

Anthropology, and
Folklore

History, including	Social sciences, including
Biography	Statistics
Economics	Language and Literature
Transportation and	Science, including
Communication	Mathematics
Commerce	Physics
Finance	Chemistry
Sociology	Biological sciences
Associations, Societies	
Socialism, Communism	Medicine
Social pathology,	
Criminology,	Agriculture
Penology	
Political science, Con-	Technology, including
stitutional history,	Engineering
Administration, and	Building
International law	Chemical technology
	Manufactures
Law	
Education	Military science, Naval
Music	science
Fine arts, including	Bibliography and Library
Architecture	science

Under the main category of Fine Arts, the order of the subdivisions is as follows: visual arts, architecture, sculpture, drawing, design, illustration, painting. Under the main category of Science, the order of the subdivisions is as follows: mathematics, mathematical logic, computer science, astronomy, physics, chemistry, geology, natural history, general biology, cytology, botany, zoology, human anatomy, physiology, microbiology. And subordinate to the main categories of Philosophy, Psychology, and Religion are: logic, speculative philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, methodology, aesthetics, ethics, mythology, and the names of various world religions.

One comment made about the Library of Congress's classification scheme has said of it that "it does not pretend to be philosophically sound; it merely seeks to be pragmatic." That is an understatement. Nothing could be more unsound philosophically, by reference to either Aristotelian or Baconian principles. Jefferson's nuclear library may have started out to be Baconian in organization, but the

twentieth-century revision of the original plan departed from it in a variety of different directions.

The other major scheme for organizing libraries is that first put into effect in 1873 by Melvil Dewey when he was the librarian of Amherst College. This became in the twentieth century the Dewey Decimal System. In its original form it comprised nine major classes or categories, which Dewey thought he had placed in a descending order that was simply the inverse of Bacon's ascending order from history (memory), through poetic literature and fiction (imagination) to science and philosophy (reason).

How far that is from being the case can be seen at once by looking at the order in which the main categories of the Dewey Decimal System are placed.

Bibliography and Library science	Public administration Welfare and Associations
Philosophy	Education
Psychology	Commerce
Religion	Customs and Folklore
Social sciences, including Sociology	Language Science, including
Statistics	Mathematics
Political science	Physics
Economics	Chemistry
Law	Biological sciences
Medicine	Fine arts, including Architecture and Music
Technology, including	Literature
Engineering	Geography
Agriculture	
Business	Biography
Chemical technology	History
Manufactures	
Building	

Both the Library of Congress scheme and the Dewey Decimal System raise a host of philosophical questions that remain unanswered. To what extent are the main categories coordinate, or on

the same level, with one another, and to what extent is there a hierarchical ordering of things that are supraordinate and subordinate to one another? If there is a hierarchical ordering, are the gradations of importance in an ascending or a descending scale? Are the subdivisions of some of the main categories appropriately named?

For example, should mathematics and logic be placed in the company of the empirical or experimental sciences? Should religion be closely associated with philosophy? Does psychology belong with philosophy or with the experimental sciences? Are there two quite different disciplines that can be called psychology, one that is a branch of philosophy and one that is an empirical science? And does the latter belong with the natural sciences or with the social sciences?

Such questions are plainly and completely avoided by recourse to the alphabet in encyclopedias and in university catalogues. But when the bibliographical systems of great libraries place their main categories in a nonalphabetical order, it is impossible to avoid raising such questions. Once the alphabet is abandoned, other principles must be employed, and they are subject to being challenged for their soundness and adequacy.

We must turn to the philosophers for answers to the kinds of questions raised by our consideration of the unphilosophical systems currently used by the great libraries of the world. Answers there are aplenty, differing from epoch to epoch, as we will see in the chapters of Part Two that follow. If we cannot adopt any of them without reservations or qualifications, we may at least be able to draw from them insights and inspirations that will serve as guidelines for anyone's exploration of the world of learning.

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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