

---

## A GUIDEBOOK TO LEARNING

For the Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom

Mortimer J. Adler

CHAPTER 10

### **A Twentieth Century Proposal**

A SURVEY of attempts to map or chart the realm of learning would be incomplete if some characteristically twentieth century efforts were not included. In this and the next two chapters I will give a brief account of them and explain why they do not deliver the guidance that is needed.

At the beginning of this century, a number of books appeared that addressed themselves to the problem of classifying library books in terms of the organization of knowledge. Three were written by Americans: *Classification, Theoretical and Practical*, by E. C. Richardson in 1930; *The Organization of Knowledge and the System of the Sciences*, by H. E. Bliss in 1929; and *The Organization of Knowledge in Libraries*, also by Bliss, 1933. It must be added that these American efforts were influenced by an earlier British book on library arrangement—*Manual of Classification and Shelf Arrangement*, by J. D. Brown, published in 1898.

Richardson's scheme was governed by his explicitly stated principle that "the order of the sciences is the order of things" and by his declaration that "the order of things is lifeless, living, human, and superhuman," thus going from the sciences of the inanimate to the sciences dealing with living organisms, and then to the sciences or disciplines dealing with human life and society, leaving religion or theology to the last.

THE ORDER OF NATURE	THE PEDAGOGIC ORDER	THE LOGICAL ORDER
Substance, Matter, Reality	Science and Philosophy	Science and Philosophy
Media (aetherial, electronic, and other	Natural Science Applied Mechanics	Natural Science Physics
Energy, Relations	Engineering	Chemistry
Physical Actions and States	Chemical Science Astronomy	Special Natural Sciences
Chemical Elements and Actions	Astronomy Geology	Geology

Bodies, Structures (inorganic)	Biology, Botany, Zoology	Biology
Organisms	Anthropology	Anthropology
Mind	Psychology	Psychology
Societies, Commu- nities, Ethnic Groups, Social Groups	Social Sciences, Sociology	Education Sociology
	Aesthetics, Technologies	Arts (fine, useful, recreative)
	Philology	Philology

While the system of the positive sciences proposed by Bliss closely resembles that proposed by Auguste Comte (mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, anthropology, and sociology), his overall view of the field of learning included much more than that list of the positive sciences. It included philosophy, history, geography, religion, politics, and the fine arts.

For Bliss, the four basic areas of human knowledge consist of philosophy, science, history, technology, and the arts. His book on the organization of knowledge contains a number of synoptic tables, constructed differently on the basis of different principles. One is constructed in accordance with the order of nature; another sets forth the pedagogical order in which things should be studied; and still another, the logical order of the subject matters to be studied.

In my judgment, these three synoptic tables are of sufficient interest to be reproduced in part. Readers need only glance at these to perceive quickly their general tenor.

In 1970, Bliss revised the system of bibliographic classification that he first presented in 1933. Here is a synopsis of its main headings:

Philosophy (its branches and its history, both Eastern and Western)	History Religion
------------------------------------------------------------------------	---------------------

Logic	Social Welfare
Mathematics	Political Science
Statistics and Probability	Public Administration
Physical Science and Technology	Law
Biological Sciences	Economics
Anthropology	Finance, Banking, and Insurance
Medicine	Technology and Useful Arts
Psychology	
Education	Fine Arts
Social Sciences	Philology

The foregoing system of bibliographic classification (here presented with some abbreviation) must be considered in its own terms and in the light of its own purposes. It is a scheme for putting books on the shelves of libraries in an orderly fashion, better in some respects than either the Dewey Decimal System or that of the Library of Congress. It is certainly more instructive than the purely alphabetical ordering of departments in a college or university catalogue, or of the articles in an alphabetically organized encyclopedia. However, it falls far short of the enlightenment or understanding that should result from a map or chart of learning based on explicitly declared philosophical principles.

Such maps or charts existed in antiquity and in the Middle Ages (see chapters 5 and 6), and also in modern times, especially in the works of Bacon, Kant, and Coleridge (see chapters 7, 8, and 9). However, none of these are wholly acceptable to us or appropriate for us in the twentieth century.

They contain some insights and some distinctions that still have relevance for us and provide us with some guidance. But the task of mapping or charting the whole sphere of knowledge and the realm of human learning remains to be done in a manner that is acceptable and appropriate today.

Two steps in that direction, in both of which I have been involved, deserve to be considered before I undertake to tackle the task that remains. One is the construction of the Propaedia, or Outline of Knowledge, published along with the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1974, and improved in the 1985 edition. The other is the Syntopicon, which was an index of the great ideas, published along with Great Books of the Western World in 1952. These two steps will be reported in chapters 11 and 12 to follow.

## CHAPTER 12

### The Syntopicon

*Great Books of the Western World* had its inception at the University of Chicago when Robert Hutchins was president of the university and I was a member of the faculty. The instigation of the project came from William Benton in 1943, the same year that he became the publisher of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

After eight years of work, involving the collaboration of many scholars, that set of books was published in 1952 with Hutchins as Editor-in-Chief and myself as Associate Editor. I was, in addition, responsible for the production of the Syntopicon that accompanied the Great Books and served as an instrument for locating passages in them where their authors discussed the topics that constituted the inner structure of the great ideas. Because it was organized around three thousand topics under 102 great ideas, that instrument, occupying two volumes in the set, came to be called *The Great Ideas*, or *Syntopicon* (the coined word “syntopicon” meaning a collection of topics).

The selection of the authors and works to comprise *Great Books* was carried out by an editorial committee over a period of three years. The production of the Syntopicon was the work of an editorial staff numbering more than thirty-five persons and involved 400,000 man hours of reading over the course of six years. This endeavor did not begin until two years had been spent in determining which ideas were “great” in the sense of being major centers of discussion and controversy throughout the twenty-five century span of Western civilization. Indexing the intellectual content of 443 works by seventy-four authors stretching across twenty-five

centuries from Homer to Freud was, to say the least, a challenging task.

Just as the Propaedia functions to give readers topical access to the information and organized knowledge contained in the encyclopedia, so the Syntopicon functions to provide readers with topical access to the ideas discussed in the *Great Books*. The problem confronted in the editing of the Syntopicon was the same as that faced in the editing of the Propaedia.

In the latter case, as we have seen, the question was: How should the ten parts of the Outline of Knowledge be organized—in a linear, ascending, or descending fashion, or in a circle that allowed each of the ten parts to be considered as coordinate with all the others?

In the case of the Syntopicon we faced a similar question: How should the 102 great ideas be set forth—with some given precedence or priority over others in terms of an evaluation of their degree of greatness, or treated as coordinate with one another, none subordinate, none supraordinate?

Our decision was the same in both cases and for the same reason. The pluralistic culture and the intellectual heterodoxy of the twentieth century, we felt, would not tolerate the kind of value judgments involved in a hierarchical ordering of either the great ideas or the parts of knowledge. An individual author, signing his name to a book he has himself written, might be in a position to argue for or defend value judgments of this kind; but a work produced by the collaborative effort of many persons, such as the Propaedia and the Syntopicon, does not have that option. Hence the 102 great ideas were presented in strictly alphabetical order, and the *Great Books* themselves were presented in a sequence roughly determined by the chronological order of their authors' lives.

Could anything be done to introduce some ordering of both the books and the ideas in a more significant and intelligible fashion than one determined alphabetically or chronologically? That question is relevant to our present concerns, for only when we depart from or transcend such intellectually neutral orderings as those provided by alphabetization and chronology do we begin to see guidelines for the pursuit of learning.

Our solution of this problem with regard to the *Great Books* was accomplished by dividing the authors into four main groups, and

then indicating such grouping by placing swatches of different color on the backbones of the volumes that contained their works.

A yellow swatch indicated works of imaginative literature—epic and dramatic poetry, novels and plays, and, in the case of Shakespeare's and Milton's sonnets, lyric poetry as well. A green swatch indicated works in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and medicine. A blue swatch indicated histories, biographies, and treatises in the fields of political theory and economics. A red swatch indicated works in philosophy and theology metaphysics, the philosophy of nature, the philosophy of mind, and both natural and sacred theology.

This classification of the volumes in *Great Books of the Western World* could not be perfectly precise, because where the volumes contained all the works of certain authors, or even several of them, placing that author in one of these four groups had to ignore the fact that some of his writings may belong in one group and some in another. His being placed in one group rather than another could be defended only in terms of the predominant character of his contribution to the tradition of Western culture.

Before I turn to the way in which we attempted to solve the same problem with regard to the great ideas, in order to offset or overcome the neutrality of their alphabetical enumeration, I think it useful to give the reader that alphabetical listing first. Here it is.

ANGEL	FAMILY	MATHEMATICS
ANIMAL	FATE	MATTER
ARISTOCRACY	FORM	MECHANICS
ART	GOD	MEDICINE
ASTRONOMY	GOOD AND EVIL	MEMORY AND
BEAUTY	GOVERNMENT	IMAGINATION
BEING	HABIT	METAPHYSICS
CAUSE	HAPPINESS	MIND
CHANCE	HISTORY	MONARCHY
CHANGE	HONOR	NATURE
CITIZEN	HYPOTHESIS	NECESSITY AND
CONSTITUTION	IDEA	CONTINGENCY
COURAGE	IMMORTALITY	OLIGARCHY
CUSTOM AND	INDUCTION	ONE AND MANY
CONVENTION	INFINITY	OPINION
DEFINITION	JUDGMENT	OPPOSITION
DEMOCRACY	JUSTICE	PHILOSOPHY
DESIRE	KNOWLEDGE	PHYSICS
DIALECTIC	LABOR	PLEASURE AND PAIN
DUTY	LANGUAGE	POETRY
EDUCATION	LAW	PRINCIPLE
ELEMENT	LIBERTY	PROGRESS

EMOTION	LIFE AND DEATH	PROPHECY
ETERNITY	LOGIC	PRUDENCE
EVOLUTION	LOVE	PUNISHMENT
EXPERIENCE	MAN	QUALITY
QUANTITY	SIN	UNIVERSAL AND
REASONING	SLAVERY	PARTICULAR
RELATION	SOUL	VIRTUE AND VICE
RELIGION	SPACE	WAR AND PEACE
REVOLUTION	STATE	WEALTH
RHETORIC	TEMPERANCE	WILL
SAME AND OTHER	THEOLOGY	WISDOM
SCIENCE	TIME	WORLD
SENSE	TRUTH	
SIGN AND SYMBOL	TYRANNY	

Is that list, as drawn up in the 1940s, satisfactory today? Should any ideas be added to it? I have only three nominations now for additions to the 102. I think the omission of Equality should be corrected, and perhaps also the omission of Power and Property. Equality certainly belongs in the list along with Liberty. Property may already be sufficiently covered in connection with Wealth; and the same may be said about Power in connection with State, Government, and Tyranny.

Examination of the 102 great ideas as alphabetically listed will reveal that the list includes twelve ideas that stand out as different from all the rest. In alphabetical order they are: Art, Astronomy, History, Mechanics, Medicine, Metaphysics, Philosophy, Physics, Poetry, Religion, Science, Theology. If readers recall the difference between Part Ten in the Propaedia, concerned with the branches of knowledge, and parts One through Nine, which cover what we know about the world by means of these various branches of knowledge, they will see that the same difference exists between the special set of twelve ideas named above and all the rest.

That difference was explained in medieval thought by a distinction between the use of our mind in the first and in the second intention. We use our minds in the first intention when we use them to know and to understand reality—the world in which we live in all its aspects. We use our minds in the second intention when we use them to know and understand the branches of knowledge that in turn study reality.

Applied to the Propaedia, this distinction requires us to differentiate Part Ten, which has second intentional significance, from Parts One through Nine, which have first intentional significance. Applied to the Syntopicon, the same distinction separates the special set of twelve ideas named from all the rest.



The second volume of the Syntopicon contains an essay on how it was constructed. That essay makes use of this distinction to suggest how ideas in the first intention can be grouped under one or another idea in the second intention. It offers examples of such groupings. These are reported below with some additions that I now think are worth making.

#### THEOLOGY and RELIGION

Angel, Eternity, God, Immortality, Prophecy, Sin

#### METAPHYSICS

Being, Cause, Change, Form, God, Infinity, Matter, Necessity and Contingency, One and Many, Opposition, Same and Other, Truth, and perhaps also Quality and Quantity

#### MATHEMATICS, MECHANICS, PHYSICS

Cause, Chance, Change, Element, Infinity, Matter, Nature, Quality, Quantity, Space, Time, World

#### LOGIC

Definition, Dialectic, Hypothesis, Induction, judgment, Language, Opposition, Reasoning, Relation, Rhetoric, Sign and Symbol, Truth, Universal and Particular

#### POLITICAL THEORY (Philosophical or Scientific)

Aristocracy, Citizen, Constitution, Custom and Convention, Democracy, Family, Government, justice, Law, Liberty [and Equality], Monarchy, Oligarchy, Punishment, Revolution, Slavery, State, Tyranny, War and Peace

ETHICS  
(or Moral Philosophy)

Courage, Duty, Good and Evil, Happiness, Honor, justice, Liberty [and Equality], Love, Pleasure and Pain, Prudence, Temperance, Virtue and Vice, Wisdom

ECONOMICS

Labor, Wealth, and also Property (if included)

PSYCHOLOGY  
(Philosophical or Scientific)

Animal, Desire, Emotion, Experience, Habit, Knowledge, Language, Love, Man, Memory and Imagination, Mind, Opinion, Pleasure and Pain, Reasoning, Sense, Sign and Symbol, Will

BIOLOGY

Animal, Evolution, Life and Death, Medicine, Sense

The foregoing does not claim to be exhaustive of all the possible ways in which ideas in the first intention can be grouped under ideas in the second intention that are the names of the various branches of knowledge or departments of learning.

There are other ways of grouping ideas—without reference to the disciplines under which they fall. For example, History, Change, Progress, and Time are intimately connected. So, too, are Experience, Habit, Memory and Imagination, and Sense.

Beauty, Good and Evil, and Truth form a traditionally acknowledged triad of fundamental values; so also do Liberty, Equality, and justice.


The ideas of Knowledge and Opinion belong in a collation with Logic, Mathematics, Metaphysics, Mechanics, Philosophy, Science, and Theology; and with them may be grouped Definition, Hypothesis, Induction, judgment, Reasoning, and Truth.

The traditionally acknowledged learned professions, which formed the triad of doctoral degrees in medieval universities, are represented in the list of great ideas by Law, Medicine, and Theology. Today we might add Engineering or Technology.

All these groupings of certain great ideas under other great ideas that name familiar disciplines or branches of knowledge, as well as the indication of other ways in which great ideas are interconnected, have much more significance for us than a purely alphabetical listing. They rise above the flat neutrality of the alphabet, but they still do not transcend it to the point where they reach a hierarchical ordering of the ideas in a scale of priorities or of grades of importance.

Whether anything like that can be done in the twentieth century, either for the branches of knowledge or for the great ideas, remains to be seen. Earlier chapters of this book, especially chapters 5 and 6 (which report ancient and medieval schemes for the organization of knowledge), and to some extent even chapters 7, 8, and 9 (which report maps or charts of learning proposed in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries), have given us orderings of the parts of knowledge that appeal to philosophical principles, either explicitly or implicitly.

The organization of knowledge, or the ordering and relation of its branches or parts, is essentially a philosophical task. It is not the business of the historian or the scientist. When either historians or scientists attempt to define their own fields of inquiry and to distinguish them from other disciplines, they do so as philosophers, not as historians or scientists.

If any light can be thrown on the problem of how to organize knowledge in the twentieth century—how to order and relate its parts or branches—it must come from philosophy; and it must do so in a manner that accords to some extent with the cultural pluralism and intellectual heterodoxy of the present age. 

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

---



---

## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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  
Ken Dzuga, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.  
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.