

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

**Mortimer Adler**

Introduction by  
**William Benton**

The above is the title from a book published in 1963, consisting of 107 questions from readers and Dr. Adler's answers from his syndicated newspaper column. This is one of the most sought after and hard to find, of all his out of print books.

You may obtain a searchable digital copy of this extraordinary book with an interactive table of contents, for a \$10 donation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ours is the age of the pat answer. The reason is not hard to come by. The tempo of contemporary life leaves us little time to think about abstract questions. So we fall gladly into the arms of the Answer Man, who awaits us everywhere—in our personal and domestic lives, in our community and political activities, and even in international affairs.

We Americans esteem as precious the right to think for ourselves. But as the world becomes more complex we permit more and more of our thinking to be done for us by alleged experts.

Mortimer Adler is an anti-expert. He is persuaded that freedom cannot withstand the free man's willingness to surrender his problems to somebody else. Every man is born to be free, and the free man should make his own decisions. Faith in reason—and faith in reasoning—becomes identical with faith in democracy. In a democracy, you and you and *you* must be the Answer Man.

Dr. Adler, who is Director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, is the first professional philosopher in my knowledge to write a successful syndicated newspaper column. The popularity of his weekly "Great Ideas from the Great Books" seems to confirm what *Time* magazine called his belief "that newspaper readers think." I welcome publication of these columns in book form as a lively contribution to man's endless effort to understand the world and himself.

Mortimer Adler has one of the most orderly, compendious, and yet adventurous minds I have ever encountered. And he is persuasive. He has persuaded some of the most influential men in America to take time out to think.

Let me tell you about one episode I was in.

In 1943 the great books movement led by Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago and by Adler was beginning to attract national attention. The Honors Course at the University of Chicago and the curriculum of St. John's College in Annapolis were widely discussed. These were based on the great books. Among adults, Adler's *How to Read a Book* had become a best seller. With several top Chicago business and professional men, I participated in a great books reading—and discussion group—the famous "Fat Men's Class"—with Hutchins and Adler at the head of

the table. This was in the midst of a world war, and forty of America's busiest men were involved!

We forty learned—or, more accurately, relearned—that the central problems of life are always the same, whether in modern America or in ancient Rome. They are the problems of *Man*—good and evil, love and hate, war and peace, happiness and duty, liberty and security. They are the same whether we humans meet them in an ox-cart, a chariot, or a tomato-colored convertible. These are the problems the authors of the great books tackled—in science, history, philosophy, and literature. Theirs is the “great conversation” of the ages, which never ends. The “Fat Men's Class” became the model for similar groups of business, political, and trade-union leaders around the country. And this class and its many lineal descendants still roll on. Seventeen years later The Great Books Foundation, sponsoring groups in libraries, schools, clubs, shops, and factories, is one of the largest adult-education enterprises in America.

But in 1943 some of the greatest books were impossible to get in a good edition. Others were unavailable in any edition. And still others had never been translated into English. I suggested to Dr. Hutchins the possibility of publishing a definitive set of the great books. On one point there was instant agreement: If it were to be done at all, it should be done right, and “right” meant a set of books not just for our time but for decades to come. The whole of Western man's accepted wisdom—from Homer and Augustine to Darwin and Freud—had to be comprehended. Out of our discussion came the decision, in 1944, that Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., which I serve as publisher and chairman, would undertake the enterprise.

Eight years later came Britannica's 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World*. The publication was a literary triumph. “A noble monument to the human mind,” said Gilbert Highet in *The New York Times*. “An intellectual enterprise which has no parallel in the history of Western man,” said Mark Van Doren in the *Herald Tribune*. The seven feet of volumes included 443 works of 74 authors. As Editor, Hutchins had presided over the group of scholars and laymen who had made the selection. As Associate Editor, Adler had occupied himself with something vaguely known to the rest of us as “the index.”

Of the two million dollars and eight years spent in producing *Great Books of the Western World*, almost half the money—and much more than half the time—was taken by Adler in the preparation of this index, now called the Syntopicon, which constitutes two thick

volumes of the 54—volume set. Adler and his editors divided all thought into 102 basic ideas—ranging from Angel to World—and broke these ideas down into 2,987 topics containing 163,000 exact references to passages in *Great Books of the Western World*. The Syntopicon also included an Inventory of Terms, a Bibliography of Additional Readings, and, most importantly, essays by Adler himself on the history of each of the 102 great ideas. The essays alone total more than a thousand pages.

Five hundred Founding Subscribers paid five hundred dollars for each set of the first edition. We celebrated the launching at a banquet in New York addressed by Dr. Hutchins, Dr. Adler, Clifton Fadiman, and myself. Then the Old Dominion Foundation gave 1,600 sets to selected public libraries across the country. *Great Books of the Western World* was in business.

After our first printings, we had an invaluable asset: the plates of the books. We planned a handsomely styled and bound edition priced within the reach of the general public. Our gamble has proved successful. Americans do want the best books in their homes. Americans do want their children to grow up in the company of great literature, great philosophy, great science. Sales increased from 3,300 sets in 1956 to more than 40,000 in 1960, and they continue to rise at an accelerating pace.

Marshall Field, Jr., publisher of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Daily News* and a member of the “Fat Men’s Class,” decided on the next gamble: a weekly column, to be distributed by his newspaper syndicate, in which Adler would choose a question submitted by a reader and reply to it not with *the* pat answer but with an analysis of the greatest thinking about it. The sole objective was to present the problem—not the solution—to the intelligent reader in terms set forth by the leading minds of all time. Within a year, twenty-eight newspapers (including the *Tokyo Kenkyu Sha*) were carrying the column, a remarkable figure for such a feature. And the number increases.

Mounting requests for a collection of selected columns—one of them from the Librarian of San Quentin Prison—led to the publication of this book.

Here in Mortimer Adler’s columns is testimony that the contemporary American cares profoundly about his life and his society—and about the light that the living tradition of thirty centuries of thought can throw upon the issues that confront him today. It has been said, “Great books are the books that never have to be written again.”

But the great ideas they explore are the birthright of every man and woman of every age. They must be constantly examined and reexamined.

The success of Mortimer Adler's column, like the success of the *Great Books of the Western World*, suggests that a new surge of learning is developing in America. I am happy to commend him and to commend his "Great Ideas from the Great Books" columns to you.

*William Benton*

Each of the 107 chapters (232 pages) of this book falls into one of a number of groups, according to the general character of the subject with which it deals. The book is divided into ten parts; each part relates to some main field of interest that can be roughly defined by a particular constellation of great ideas. PLEASE READ THE TABLE OF CONTENTS:

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Here are two examples of the 107 letters:

**1. WHAT IS TRUTH?**

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*I find it hard to define what truth is. Some of my friends say that truth is what most people think is so. But that does not make sense to me, because sometimes the majority is wrong. Even what everyone thinks is so may not be the truth. There must be some better definition of truth. What is it?*

A. N.

*Dear A. N.,*

You are quite right to feel dissatisfied. Your friends did not arrive at a definition of truth, but at one of the signs of truth. In certain cases the fact that the majority holds something to be true is an indication that it is *probably* true. But this is only *one* of the signs of truth, and by no means the best one. And it does not answer your question or Pilate's—"What is truth?"



It may help us to understand the nature of truth to consider what is involved in telling a lie. If a man tells a woman “I love you” when he does not, he is telling a lie. When a child who has raided the cookie jar tells his mother “I didn’t,” he is lying. Lying consists in saying the opposite of what you know, think, or feel. It is distinct from honest error, such as that of the umpire who calls a man “out” when he is “safe,” or vice versa.

Josiah Royce, a great American philosopher at the beginning of this century, defined a liar as a man who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates; that is, a man who says “is” when he means “is not,” or “is not” when he means “is.” Royce’s definition of a liar leads us quickly to the most famous of all philosophical definitions of truth. It was given by Plato and Aristotle almost twenty-five centuries ago; it has been repeated in various ways ever since, and seldom been improved upon.

Plato and Aristotle say that the opinions we hold are true when they assert that that which is, *is*, or that that which is not, *is not*; and that our opinions are false when they assert that that which is, *is not*, or that that which is not, *is*. When the “is” in a statement we make agrees with the way things are, then our statement is true, and its truth consists in its corresponding to the existent facts of nature or reality. When we think that something exists or has happened which does not exist or did not happen, then we are mistaken and what we think is false.

So, as you see, truth is very easy to define, and the definition is not very hard to understand. Perhaps impatient Pilate would have waited for the answer if he had known that it could be given so briefly. But maybe he was thinking of another question, “How can we tell whether a statement is true or false?” This, by the way, is the question you and your friends ended up answering.

To this question there are three main types of answer. The first insists that some statements are self-evidently true, such as, “The whole is greater than the part.” Such statements reveal their truth to us directly by the fact that we find it impossible to think the opposite of them. When we understand what a whole is and what a part is, we *cannot* think that a part is greater than the whole to which it belongs. That is how we know immediately the truth of the statement that the whole is greater than any of its parts.

Another type of answer says that the truth of statements can be tested by our experience or observations. If a man says that it did not rain in Chicago a single day last month, we can check the truth

of his statement by looking up the official weather records. Or we can stick a foot into a swimming pool to see if the water is as warm as a friend says it is. Similarly, a scientific generalization is considered true only as long as no contrary facts are observed.

The third type of answer has to do with statements that are neither self-evidently true nor capable of being checked by direct appeal to observed facts. It may be a question of a person's character, what type of product is most desirable for certain purposes, or whether the favorite will win the next race. Here it is permissible to count noses and to find the consensus of a group of people or of the experts. That an opinion is held by a majority can be taken as a sign that it has some probability of being true.

This third answer was the one your friend arrived at. But the fact that it expressed the consensus of the group does not make it the right answer to the question, "What is truth?" Nor does it give the full answer to the question, "How can we tell whether a statement is true?"

Defining truth is easy; knowing whether a particular statement is true is much harder; and pursuing the truth is most difficult of all.

## 2. KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*Is there such a thing as knowledge, or is everything a matter of opinion? Our picture of the world and our way of life has changed so much in the last fifty years that I wonder whether we can have certain knowledge about anything. Isn't most of our so-called knowledge really opinion?*

*F. S.*

*Dear F. S.,*

Most of us know what an opinion is. We recognize that our opinions are beliefs that others need not share. We are used to having those who disagree with us say, "Well, that is only *your opinion*" (or "*your opinion*"). Even when we advance an opinion on very good grounds, we usually feel some doubt about it. "I have good reason to believe so," we say, "but I wouldn't swear to it."

Here, then, are three characteristics of opinions: (1) they express probabilities rather than certainties; (2) they are subject to doubt; and (3) reasonable men can differ about which of two conflicting opinions is sounder.

There is a perennial skepticism which holds that *everything* is a matter of opinion. The extreme skeptic reduces even such things as mathematics and science to opinion. He points out, for example, that a system of geometry rests on arbitrary assumptions. Other assumptions can be made and other systems of geometry developed. Experimental science at its best, the skeptic maintains, consists of highly probable generalizations, not indubitable certainties.


In contrast with such skepticism is the view of the ancient Greek philosophers. Plato and Aristotle think that there are some matters about which men can have genuine knowledge. In the very nature of things, some things are necessary and cannot be otherwise. For example, by the very nature of wholes and parts, it is necessary that the whole should always be greater than any of its parts. This is something we know for certain. On the other hand, there is nothing in the natures of gentlemen and blondes that makes it necessary for gentlemen always to prefer blondes, and so this is only a matter of opinion.

The difference between knowledge and opinion can also be expressed in psychological terms. When we are asked, “Do gentlemen prefer blondes?” or “Will the Republicans win the 1964 election?” we must make up our own mind. Nothing about the matter in question compels us to answer Yes or No. But when we are asked whether the whole is greater than any of its parts, we have no choice about the answer. If we put our mind to thinking about the relation of whole and part, we can think about that relation in only one way. The object we are thinking about makes up our mind for us.

This gives us a very clear criterion for telling whether what we assert is knowledge or opinion. It is knowledge when the object that we are thinking about compels us to think of it in a certain way. What we think then is not our personal opinion. But when the object of our thought leaves us free to make up our mind about it, one way or the other, then what we think is only an opinion—our *personal opinion, voluntarily formed*. Here other rational persons can differ with us.

On this understanding of the difference between knowledge and opinion, we must admit that most of our assertions are opinions.

But we should also realize that opinions differ in their soundness. Some are based on considerable evidence or reasons which, while not conclusive, make them highly probable. Others are ill-founded, and others have no foundation at all but are simply willful prejudices on our part.

This leaves open the question whether history, mathematics, experimental science, and speculative philosophy should be classified as knowledge or opinion. As we have seen, the extreme skeptic would say that they are all opinion, though he might recognize that they have much more weight than mere personal opinions or private prejudices. The opposite view, which I would defend, is that we can have knowledge in the fields of mathematics and philosophy, and highly probable opinion in the fields of experimental science and history. 

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Heather Isenhower**

*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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