THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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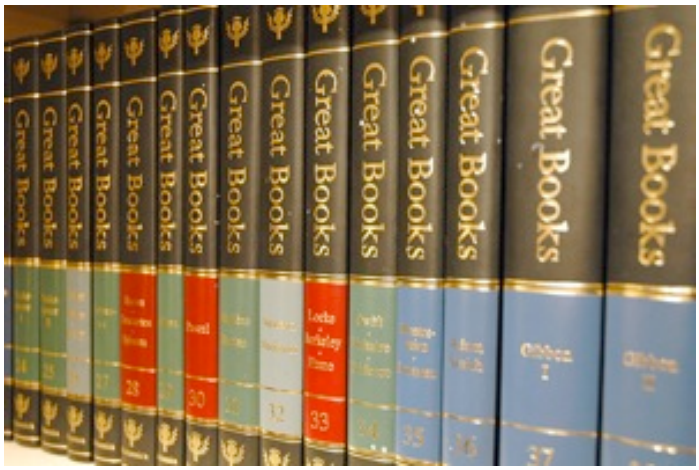

GREAT BOOKS OF THE WESTERN WORLD

Presents

A READING PLAN FOR CHILDREN

Your Children Can Read the Great Books

Your children can read the GREAT BOOKS if you help them and let them help you. These dauntless young tyros are searching and growing, and gathering information and know-how at a rate much faster than they will even at college age. They are ready to go if you are with them and show them the way. Their great asset, of course, is their inexhaustible curiosity, daring, open-mindedness. They do not excuse themselves as we self-indulgent parents often do, on grounds that they are too tired or too busy. Initially they are all eagerness to start something new. The GREAT BOOKS, it must be admitted, are a challenge to their faculties and demand the utmost from their abilities, but is not this the great stimulus to growth? By attempting what lies beyond their powers, ambition and capacity both expand. A man's reach, as Browning said, should exceed his grasp.

The initial confidence of young people embodies a philosophical truth which can renew the faith of self-styled "tired" adults. In his

great essay, “The Energies of Man” William James declares that men in the ordinary course of life consume only a tenth part of their total energies. When special opportunity or emergencies arise, all of us surpass ourselves. The doors of learning and adventure are open then, if we ourselves do not close them. Children can renew our interest in the GREAT BOOKS we “have not had time for,” and teach us fresh and truer approaches to them.

The GREAT BOOKS have much to say to children from 10 years of age on, and the amount they can assimilate depends not only on their age and preparedness, but also upon the role played by the parents. Unless the young people are college students or very serious high school students, they will need a great deal of aid and support from adults, who must be prepared to define words, to explain difficult passages, to fill in the historical background, to interpret sentiments and motivations and, in fact, to participate in the project all along the line. They will have to read or reread the GREAT BOOKS themselves, and even study them, for when the questions begin they will want to make a good showing. Experience shows that parents, once they become involved, not only find the time for study but gradually come to enjoy it as an absorbing pastime. The hardest task is to make a beginning.

The initiative for a program of family reading and discussion must come from the parents. To make a beginning we suggest the following list of books and shall then recommend several procedures that might be followed.

A READING LIST FOR CHILDREN

Homer	The Odyssey The Illiad
Plato	Apology Crito
Herodotus	History of the Persian War
Plutarch	The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans Pompey Pericles Marcus Brutus Caesar Alexander Antony Alcibiades
Shakespeare	Julius Caesar Antony and Cleopatra Romeo and Juliet The Comedy of Errors As You Like It Much Ado About Nothing Coriolanus The Merchant of Venice
Montaigne	The Essays Of Fear Of Studies Of Cannibals Of Revenge Of Sleep Of Friendship Of Adversity Of Gardens
Swift	Gulliver's Travels
Fielding	The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling
Melville	Moby Dick or the Whale
Hamilton Madison Jay	The Federalist Papers (together with The Declaration of Independence and The Constitution)
Darwin	Origin of Species & The Descent of Man

The Family Reads Plato's Apology and Crito

If the parent should decide to commence the family reading bee or discussion circle with the Iliad or Odyssey, his task would not be too difficult, for young people have been reading these epics on and off for 2,000 years. But it would be well for him to keep well ahead of the children, and make sure that he can define difficult words and explain the exploits and interrelations of the most important characters. For this purpose a book on mythology or a classical dictionary would be useful, and it would be well to keep it on hand during the discussion when the questions are fired. Sometimes a chart displaying the geneology and relationship of the main characters is found helpful. So also a map of the Aegean Sea, showing Greece and Troy with its environs. The parent who is willing to do his bit of studying usually gets along all right, unless he becomes a perfectionist. If he insists on knowing everything, everything may go to pot. He should remember that Zeus himself is sometimes taken by surprise and does not know the right answer.

Homer would be relatively easy to handle, at least if one avoids perfectionism and steers the discussion in accord with the capacities and interests of the group. Plato's dialogues will be more difficult but also more rewarding, and that is why we have chosen to discuss them in particular, beginning with the simplest and easiest of all—the Apology and Crito. Socrates' rebuttal of the charges against him—his so-called "apology"—is the most famous courtroom defense in history, and each generation reading it anew falls under the spell of this wise and courageous man, who chose death rather than to make even the slightest compromise with his conscience or the truth.

In the discussion of the Apology a number of questions arise, or can be raised by the parent:

1. What is the method Socrates uses to rebut the charges brought by Meletus? The brief answer is that Socrates shows that they lead to self-contradiction or nonsense. For example, how can it be claimed that Socrates is an atheist when it is admitted that he believes in the existence of the sons of the gods? This is self-contradictory. And how can it be said that Socrates intentionally corrupts the youth when it is admitted that anyone would prefer to live among good people than among bad ones. This is an absurdity. It should be kept in mind, however, that Socrates does not take Melees seriously. The demonstration that he is a fool who does not understand the charges he has brought is devastating

but humorous.

2. What were the real underlying reasons for indicting Socrates? Anytus, one of the most powerful and popular leaders of the Athenian democracy, was the real accuser. But what objection could he have had to the philosopher? Socrates reminds his judges, and even boasts, that he had once defied the democracy when it had required him to perform an illegal act, and that he had also refused to carry out an unconstitutional order of the Thirty Tyrants, who held power in Athens for a short time. Moreover, some of the young men in Socrates' circle of admirers, Alcibiades, Critias, and Charmides, had become notorious enemies of democracy. There was also Socrates search for the wisest of men, and his discovery that those deemed by the world to be wise were in fact ignorant and silly. That also had earned him powerful enemies. And the attitude toward Socrates was not improved when young men who gathered about him began to imitate his method, and went about demonstrating that the knowledge of their elders was mere pretense. All in all, Socrates had not been a faithful follower of the reigning democracy, but had constantly challenged its wisdom. He had been, as he himself said, "a gadfly to the State."

3. But why were not the real charges brought out into the open, and why did Anytus, the real accuser, remain in the background? This was because the Act of Oblivion made it impossible to bring charges against a citizen for what he had done prior to the archonship of Euclides. Thus, trumped-up charges had to be brought against Socrates. After disposing of these flimsy accusations in a light, humorous way, Socrates is obliged to himself unearth the real reasons for his indictment, and he does so in the boldest, most provocative way.

4. This leads to the question: Could Socrates have avoided the death penalty? The unmistakable answer is that he could easily have done so had he been willing to admit that certain things he had done were wrong and to promise better conduct in the future. Even without this concession he could have avoided the extreme penalty had he treated his judges more diplomatically, and suggested as penalty a fine which his friends would have been happy to pay. His accusors did not insist on the death penalty, nor did they desire it they merely wanted to stop his eternal questioning, either

by a promise that he would refrain or by his removal from the city. It was Socrates who narrowed down the issue, and left his judges no alternative but to acquit a completely innocent man or condemn him to death on the charges, flimsy though they were.

5. Did Socrates deliberately seek martyrdom? Yes, if this means that he thought the issue of conscience involved more important than his own life. What do you think?

6. Do you agree with Socrates when he says that it is better to suffer than to commit injustice, so that the judges who condemn him to death are in a worse plight than he is?

7. Do you think that the death of Socrates has any similarity to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ?

8. Do you think that Socrates in questioning the foundations of Athenian democracy, was a threat to its existence? Should the democracy allow the opponents of democracy to teach the youth.

Turning now to Crito (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 7, p. 213f.) we find Socrates again seeking death rather than compromising with truth or his conscience. He could easily have escaped from jail, either before or after the trial, and public opinion would not have disapproved. It was only Socrates who disapproved. Do you think he was right?

In considering the reasons Socrates gives for refusing to escape it is well to remember that times have changed. Banishment, for example, was a far greater punishment in ancient Greece than it would be today. Socrates had already lived a long life in Athens, and it is probably true, as he said, that to begin all over again in another city would be most difficult. But would it be fair to say that this was his most important reason for declining the advice of his friend Crito?

One argument is crucial and should not be overlooked. Socrates points out (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 7, pp. 216-217) that escaping from jail would be breaking the laws of Athens, which he has tacitly agreed to obey and respect, no matter whether in some cases they work an injustice or not. By virtue of his long life in Athens and his acceptance of its institutions he has virtually agreed not to break its laws. He is, therefore, under contract, so to speak, to remain in jail and suffer punishment, however unjust this may be.

This is the beginning of the famous social contract theory which made such a big stir in the world when it was revived in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, by Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau. According to their theory the basis of government is an implicit contract between the people, and the sovereign, whereby the people bind themselves to respect the laws in return for peace and order and other benefits of government. For Socrates the government might be monarchy, aristocracy, plutocracy or democracy. His own ideal was aristocracy or the "rule of the best," but even aristocratic government, while binding citizens to obedience, rests on the consent of the governed.

In the chapter on GOVERNMENT in the Syntopicon you will find a discussion of this subject and under the heading "1a. The origin and necessity of government: the issue concerning anarchy" there are many references to the subject in Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and others. Browsing in a history of philosophy or a history of Greek philosophy would also be rewarding and help to fill in the background and give direction to the discussion. One thing the parent should make clear to his group is that there is a big difference between disobeying a particular act of the government and violating the constitution on which it rests. On two occasions, already mentioned, Socrates refused to obey a directive of the government under which he lived and, in consequence, narrowly escaped with his life. His reason in both instances was that the directive was unconstitutional. Socrates' loyalty was to laws, not men. Would this also be the attitude of the parent and his circle of young people?

Another basic question that might be discussed is Socrates' contention, which reappears in several dialogues, that men never knowingly and intentionally do wrong. Can it possibly be true, as Socrates claims, that vice is ignorance and virtue merely knowledge? How about Socrates' accusers? Were they really acting in ignorance, and doing wrong unintentionally? This is evidently Socrates' opinion. Meletus was a third-rate poet, honest but stupid, and thought he was proceeding against a man who was dangerous to public morals and the State. Similarly, Anytus was an astute politician who wanted to be rid of a subtle critic of the democracy, a "gadfly to the State." Both were misguided men, and so were the judges, and Socrates never hints that they have any other fault than ignorance. The implications of this Socratic doctrine are portentous and should be discussed at length. If it is sound, learning is the sole cure of evil, wise men should govern the State, punishment should be abolished and the jails turned into schools.

These few suggestions as to how to conduct a family study circle relate specifically to Plato's Apology and Crito, but have a general relevance to other dialogues that may be discussed, and to other readings in the GREAT BOOKS, such as those listed above. Once a beginning is made, the on-the-spot knowledge and inspiration of the parent can solve many problems which those at a distance from the particular group cannot foresee.

The Participation of the Parents

Whatever selections from the GREAT BOOKS are chosen, the parents will not only have to keep ahead in their reading, but in some cases plan the discussion and look up biographical data and background material as well. The facts about the authors can be found in many places, of course, including encyclopaedias such as Britannica. As for background, the various chapters of the Syntopicon, which make up Volumes 2 and 3 of the GREAT BOOKS, are precisely designed to give the reader an over-all view of a basic subject and of the continuing issues and debates into which it divides.

If the group is to read the Apology, the chapter on GOVERNMENT would throw a lot of light, as we have said, raising questions and suggesting diverse answers which would spark the busy discussion hour. The chapters on VIRTUE and COURAGE would also provide background and orientation. The children as well as the parent can often read them with ease. If not, let them write down their questions for the discussion period; and if it should happen that the parent cannot answer them, let him write them down for the next discussion period.

The References at the end of the Syntopicon chapters can also be explored with advantage. Suppose again that the family group is on the Apology and that the parent at least has read the chapter on VIRTUE. If he will now look at the references under the second heading, namely, "1a. The relation between knowledge and virtue," he will discover a whole history of this Socratic doctrine which is put forward in the Apology and other Platonic dialogues. By following up these references he can quickly find out what the Bible has to say on the subject, and the relevant views of Aristotle, Spinoza, Freud, and many others. If the parent wants to be prepared up to the hilt and ready for any question that may be fired, he should not only read the passages but make notes to which he can refer during the discussion. But there is no reason why he should do all the work himself; if there is a young person in the group who

is able to do so, he will be very happy to assist the parent.

To this program of family study, certain objections are commonly made. Even those parents who subsequently make a success of it are apt to begin with the remonstrance: "This presupposes that I am a philosopher and a teacher, but the fact is that I am neither." On the surface this may be true, but it is a dry and shallow truth. No parent in the natural course of life can avoid explaining the nature of right and wrong, good and bad, or the sense of life and the nature of the world. No parent can escape becoming a philosopher and a teacher, and "becoming" is the right word for it. Even professional philosophers are merely becoming what they aim to be, and only approximate to their ideal.

Philosophy, like chemistry and astronomy, is essentially the concern of all men and the condition of citizenship in a democratic State, and teaching is what all men want to do, though not necessarily in school, a large part of their time. All parents are in way of becoming philosophers and teachers; the study course we are urging simply accelerates that process.

Pestalozzi, one of the greatest authorities on education, held that in an ideal society everyone would assume the role of a teacher, adults teaching other adults and children, and older children teaching younger ones, and modern movements in education, such as the Lancaster method, have taken up the idea. We know in general that one of the best ways to learn a subject is to teach it, In particular, a great deal of experience has shown that busy parents, who would not otherwise have time for the GREAT BOOKS (or would not think they have time), become deeply immersed in them once they set about enlisting the interest of their children.

When questions arise the parent should not be dismayed if his explanations and paraphrases amount at times to crude simplifications, for the young people have to master the GREAT BOOKS gradually and step-wise, in terms of their growing ability and expanding store of knowledge. It is the same, though on a more advanced level, with us adults. We may sail along smoothly a great distance, but the voyages the greatest writers have charted are not always easy. As new perspectives and implications open up we must grope, reread, and reconsider. We can sympathize with the young people.

We should also remember that when they are listening to fine literature children are drinking in far more than they can articulate, and laying the foundation for later, more mature comprehension.

Do not allow young persons in the group to fall into discouragement because they encounter difficulties. There is nothing more important than to develop early in life the habit of reading books that one cannot completely understand; nothing more unfortunate than the petulant practice of discarding a book the moment words, formulas, or arguments turn up which cannot be understood, or which require patience and effort. The young people should be made to realize that the GREAT BOOKS present problems for all readers, even for the best trained and wisest, and that that is why they exert continuing influence through the centuries.

A New Plan for the Family Reading Circle

There is an additional way of making the GREAT BOOKS available to children for family use, and this is to employ the reference system of the Syntopicon which, as you know, comprises Volumes 2 and 3 of the GREAT BOOKS. Let us suppose, for example, that at the dinner table the subject of the FAMILY came up for discussion and questions were asked such as: Are there families in every country, even among savages? Why are families necessary? Did anyone ever think that family life, as we have it, is all wrong? What rights do parents have over their children, and do children have any rights? Is the family democratic or aristocratic? What happens to the family when there are several wives?

When questions of the kind arise, and there is obviously keen interest in the subject, the parent familiar with the Syntopicon might decide to strike while the iron is hot, that is, to announce that there will be a reading bee at a certain hour in which the answers given by some of the world's greatest writers will be explored. If the parent makes such an announcement, however, he must then repair to the library and decide in advance what authors and what passages will be most apt and appropriate. He will first read through the brief chapter on the FAMILY, and then turn to the References at the end. The first heading that meets his eye will be, "The nature and necessity of the family" and the first entry is a reference to the Old Testament which explains why man and wife are one flesh. This would make a good beginning of the reading session. The next citation is four or five pages from the Republic in which Plato argues that the State should take over the offices of the family, and the children be raised in common; the children, that is, will call men and women of a certain age fathers and mothers, but remain ignorant of their real parents.

The parent is likely to decide, especially in view of the strong reasons Plato gives for his extreme views, that these pages should be

one of the readings. Besides they are directly pertinent to one or two of the questions asked at dinner. The same will be true of other passages cited in the first section, such as Aristotle's explanation of why "there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other" (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 9, pp. 445f.). Also, Rousseau's account of the beginnings of the family in The Origin of Inequality (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 38, pp. 323 f.) and Marx and Engel's denunciation of the bourgeois family in The Communist Manifesto (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 50, pp. 415 f.).

The parent can easily see that, if he is prepared to fill in a little background and supply a few explanations, such passages will be readily understood by the children, and that a good discussion will be possible. As he looks ahead at the other captions in the Outline of Topics on the FAMILY, his eye will be caught by such topics as "Monogamy and polygamy" (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 2, p. 500), "Parents and children" (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 2, p. 505), and "The care and government of children: the rights and duties of the child, parental despotism and tyranny" (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 2, p. 506). It will become apparent that with a little time and patience he could organize many reading sessions on the topic of the FAMILY, and that many other questions which come up normally in everyday discussions could, with the help of the Syntopicon, be turned to advantage.

The nature of COURAGE, for example, might be raised. Is what passes as courage always the genuine article? What are the various forms of authentic courage, and how are they to be distinguished from pretense and sham courage? The Syntopicon will again supply a great number of varied passages. I should advise parents first to read the chapter on COURAGE, and then to turn to the References at the end (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 2, pp. 260-267). The references to Homer, Plato, and Aristotle on the subject of courage will be especially valuable for family discussion. Is courage, for example, merely full knowledge of how to act in dangerous situations, together with the "know-how" and ability to act, as Socrates maintains; or as Protagoras contends, is something else needed for courageous action? (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 7, pp. 57d-64d).

The idea that courage is a mean between the extremes—foolhardiness and cowardice—will be found, if you follow up some of the references to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (GREAT BOOKS Vol. 9, pp. 335 ff.), Foolhardiness is a sham virtue, though it is closer to courage, and easier to overcome than cowardice. The same thought is echoed in stately language by Don Quixote (GREAT BOOKS, Vol. 29, P. 256), who argues that it is bet-

ter for him, as a knight-errant to err on the side of rashness than of cowardice. It is well to notice here, however, that whether an action is courageous or foolhardy depends, according to Aristotle, on the issue at stake. Risking one's life for a slight cause is foolhardy; for a great cause, courageous. Cervantes' Don Quixote made this distinction and, convinced that he was redressing the wrongs of the world, he also thought he was following the path of courage. Plato also makes the distinction: He does not want to turn over the reins of government to military men because they are too mettlesome in small causes—too quick to anger in points of honor.

Perhaps I have said enough to indicate that readings on COURAGE might catch the interest of the children, and lead to worthwhile discussions. The same could be said for many of the special topics in the chapter on VIRTUE and JUSTICE. That even a slight familiarity with the greatest literature will have the effect of enlarging the perspectives of children, and of putting their complete talents to the test, is beyond question. That it will facilitate the reading of textbooks and the other books designed for youth also seems obvious. The advantages are clear, but so are the hard work and close attention required, especially on the part of the adults who lead the way. There is no royal road to knowledge, but there is a democratic cooperative one. If a family reading project with a definite subject has been launched, and some difficulty develops in carrying it out, the Great Books Research Service will be glad to give advice. It is expected, however, that the patient and ingenious parent, under the stimulation offered by his particular group, will be able to manage very well by himself. 🕮

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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