

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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THE GREAT IDEAS

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INTRODUCTION

A cultural delusion is widespread in the 20th century. The extraordinary progress in science and technology that we have achieved in this century has deluded many of our contemporaries into thinking that similar progress obtains in other fields of mental activity. They unquestioningly think that the 20th century is superior to its predecessors in all the efforts of the human mind.

Some of our contemporaries make this inference consciously and explicitly. They do not hesitate to declare that the 20th century has a better, a more advanced and sounder, solution of moral and political problems, that it is more critically penetrating in its philosophical thought, and that it is superior in its understanding of, and even in its wisdom about, the perennial questions that confront human beings in every generation.

This lecture about the great ideas and issues and about the great conversation concerning these ideas that can be found in the great books is not for them. Their minds are closed to the possibility that they may be wrong in the inference they have made without examining the evidence to the contrary that can be provided.

But there may be some—perhaps many—among our contemporaries of which this is not true. They may be prone to the 20th-century delusion as a result of the indoctrination they received from an inadequate schooling, or as a result of the currents of journalistic opinion that fill the press, the radio, and the television.

But they may still be open to persuasion that they have mistakenly believed in the superiority of the 20th century in all fields of intellectual endeavor.

It may be possible to show them that, though the 20th century has made some contribution to the understanding of the great ideas, the significance of that contribution cannot be understood without seeing it in the light of the greater contribution made in earlier epochs of the last 25 centuries.

This lecture is the apt remedy for what I have called the 20th-century delusion, which psychiatrists would call a grandiose delusion. The 102 essays in the *Syntopicon* on the great ideas dramatically exhibit the great conversation that has been going on across the centuries, in which any unprejudiced and undeluded mind will see the merit of what has been thought and said. Such wisdom as has been achieved is in no way affected or conditioned by time and place.

Unprejudiced and undeluded readers of the essays on the 102 great ideas will, I think, discover for themselves that little or no progress has been made in the understanding of the great ideas across the centuries. It is almost as if the authors amply quoted in these essays were all sitting around a large table talking face to face with one another, differing in their opinions, disagreeing, and arguing.

An auditor of the conversation going on would soon come to regard them as if they were all alike as eminent contemporaries, in spite of the differences in time, place, and language that differentiate them. That auditor would not regard what he heard as voices from the remote past talking about problems no longer of vital concern. Instead, he or she would become fascinated by the fact that all the things he or she heard being said concerned matters of current interest and importance.

I am saying that our Western civilization is the civilization of the dialogue, which is the great conversation in the great books about the great ideas.

THE ADJECTIVE "GREAT"

You may be puzzled and even annoyed by my repeated use of the adjective "great." The great authors are the writers of the great books. They engage in a great conversation. What about? The great ideas. Are all these uses of the adjective related in an orderly way so that one can discern the primary use from which the other uses are derived and by which they are controlled?

I think I have an answer to that question, one that helps me to explain why there will always be controversies about which books, in the literature available to us, deserve to be called "great." There are many different standards or criteria by which persons can judge a book to be great, and its writer a great author.

Different groups of persons will, if called upon to do so, construct different lists of books that deserve the status of "great." This is not the case when we consider ideas rather than books.

Take the list of the 102 ideas with which the essays in the *Syntopicon* deal. There maybe some disagreement about them, but it will be very slight, indeed; there are few of these ideas that anyone would recommend dropping and few that anyone would recommend adding, and those recommended for addition, like EQUALITY, will be found in the Inventory of Terms and will be seen as subordinate to the 102 ideas.

If we take the adjective "great" as the qualifier of ideas and as the controlling criterion of our other uses of it, then many things are clarified and little controversy is engendered. The great conversation is the discussion of the great ideas during the last 25 centuries of Western culture.

There may be other great ideas and other great conversations about them in three or four of the cultures in the Far East—Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist. But these are not only quite separate from one another, they are also extraneous to the great conversation about the 102 great ideas in Western literature and thought.

At this stage in the history of the world, a world cultural community does not exist, and a global set of great ideas cannot be compiled. The future may hold the possibility of one global great conversation, but that lies far ahead of where we are today.

Given the reality of the great conversation for us who have inherited the Western tradition, it is that discussion of the great ideas which determines how we draw the line between books and authors that deserve to be called “great” and those that do not.

But, it may be asked, what tangible evidence can be given of the *reality* of the great conversation? What shows us that such a conversation really did take place from antiquity to the present day?

The editorial staff that I headed found a way of demonstrating the existence of the great conversation. They constructed two indices—one called “The Author-to-Author Index”; the other called “The Author-to-Idea Index.”

The first of these indices listed, beginning with the Greek tragic poets and with Herodotus, who came chronologically after Homer, the authors they read and referred to or commented on. As we come down the chronological series of authors, the editorial staff listed all the preceding authors that any author in the series had obviously read and *talked back to*.

Obviously, earlier authors could not refer explicitly to their successors, but often points that they made anticipated what would be considered and challenged later. This Author-to-Author Index shows the great conversation going on across the centuries.

The 54 volumes of the first edition of *Great Books of the Western World* in 1952 ended with the works of such late 19th- and 20th-century authors as Herman Melville, William James, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. Each of these authors were found to have read and commented on 25 or more of their predecessors.

When six volumes of 20th-century authors were added to the 2nd edition of *Great Books* in 1990, fewer of these authors appear to have been as well read as their predecessors, but for some, such as

Alfred North Whitehead, Werner Heisenberg, Max Weber, Claude Levi-Strauss, and James Joyce, their acquaintance with the works of their eminent predecessors is as clearly evident.

The Author-to-Idea Index provided another demonstration of the reality of the great conversation. The editorial staff listed, from Homer down to the 20th-century authors, the number of great ideas that each author could be found discussing, counting the appearance of citations of their work in the topics under each idea.

Thus, for example, Homer appears in 51 chapters of the *Syntopicon*, Herodotus in 71 chapters, Plato in 100, Aristotle in all 102, Plutarch in 79, Augustine in 97, Aquinas in 102, Dante in 84, Shakespeare in 79, Montaigne in 90, Francis Bacon in 97, Spinoza in 79, Gibbon in 88, Locke in 98, J. S. Mill in 82, Hegel in 97, Tolstoy in 96, Darwin in 71, Marx in 71, Freud in 91. When we come to the 20th-century authors, their works, for the most part, are cited in less than half of the 102 great ideas.

In a sense, it is the *Syntopicon* itself with its almost 3,000 topics that provides the best evidence for the reality of the great conversation.

QUESTIONS TO BE ANSWERED

You may be naturally inclined to ask the following questions.

What is an idea?

What are the great ideas and what makes them great?

Why 102 of them?

How were they chosen?

You may, in addition, seek the answers to further questions:

What is the *Syntopicon* and how does it provide an index to the great ideas?

How do the essays contained in the *Syntopicon* relate to the great books contained in the 60-volume set?

The answers to these questions will lead to some understanding of the great conversation about the great ideas that is to be found in the *Great Books*. Inquiring readers will then see that by reading the

essays in the *Syntopicon* they will be introduced to this conversation.

They will thus be prepared to participate in the great conversation by the thinking that they are enabled to do on the thousands of topics that locate the differences and disagreements of the most eminent minds that have contributed to the Western tradition of thought in the last 25 centuries. In doing so, they will have taken an important step toward becoming generally educated human beings.

WHAT IS AN IDEA?

In the vocabulary of daily speech, the word “idea” is generally used to name the subjective contents of our own minds—things that each of us has in his or her own mind.

This use of the word predominates in a large portion of modern psychology, concerned as it is with something called “the association of ideas” or “the stream of consciousness”—with the images we experience in dreams or in acts of imagination.

It is a kind of omnibus terms that covers all the contents of our minds when we have any conscious experience—our sensations and perceptions, our images and memories, and the concepts we form.

But that, obviously, is not the way the word “idea” is being used when we engage one another in the discussion of ideas. In order for a discussion between two or more persons to occur, they must be engaged in talking to one another about something that is a common object of their conjoined apprehension. They do not have a common object to discuss if each of them is speaking only of his own ideas in the subjective sense of the term.

Consider, for example, a number of individuals arguing with one another about liberty and justice, about war and peace, or about government and democracy. They probably differ in the way they subjectively think about these matters. Otherwise, they would not find themselves arguing about them. But it must also be true that they could not be arguing with one another if they did not have a common object to which they were all referring. That common object is an idea in the objective sense of the term.

These two uses of the one word “idea”—the subjective use of it to signify the contents of an individual’s conscious mind and the ob-

jective use of it to signify something that is a common object being considered and discussed by two or more individuals—may be a source of confusion to many.

We might try to eliminate the source of confusion by restricting the use of the word “idea” to its subjective sense and substituting another mode of speech for “idea” in its objective sense. We might always use the phrase “object of thought” instead. Thus, liberty and justice, war and peace, government and democracy, might be called objects of thought.

When many years ago, with the help of a large staff gathered at the Institute for Philosophical Research, I wrote two large volumes entitled *The Idea of Freedom*, reviewing and relating everything that had been written in the last 25 centuries about that subject, I might have given the two volumes another title, as follows: *Freedom as an Object of Thought*. For if the idea of freedom is not understood as an object of thought, how could we have reviewed and related the thinking that has been done about it in the last 25 centuries?

One other example may help to reinforce what has just been said. Let us turn from our thinking to our sense-experience of the world in which we live. We are in a room sitting at a table. On the table is a glass of wine. You are facing the light and I am sitting with my back to it. We have, therefore, different subjective impressions or perceptions of the color of the table and of the wine in the glass.

But in spite of our divergent subjective perceptual experiences, we know that we are sitting at one and the same table and looking at one and the same glass of wine. We can put our hands on the table and move it. We can both take sips out of the same glass of wine. Thus we know that the table and the glass of wine are one and the same perceptual *object* for both of us. It is that common object that we can talk about as well as move and use.

If this is clear, then I recommend that we use the word “idea” in its objective sense as a common object of thought that two or more individuals can discuss and either agree or disagree about. To eliminate the word “idea” in its objective sense and always use instead the phrase “object of thought” would be cumbersome.

We live in two worlds—(1) the sensible world of the common perceptual objects that we move around and use in various ways AND (2) the intelligible world of ideas, the common objects of thought

that we cannot touch with our bodies or perceive with our senses, but that, as thinking individuals, we can discuss with one another.

*WHAT ARE THE GREAT IDEAS
AND WHAT MAKES THEM GREAT?*

Clearly, not all the perceptual objects in the sensible world of our everyday experience are equally important to us, equally valuable or useful for one purpose or another. The same is true of the intelligible world of ideas that are objects of thought.

There are thousands upon thousands of ideas in that intelligible world, but only a relatively small number in that multitude occur again and again as discussables—as foci of human interest and dispute. Only a small number subsume all the rest, as we shall see presently.

That small number which are the focal points of maximum human interest and importance in every era and epoch and in every generation are the great ideas. All the others that might be mentioned lead into them or are in one way or another subordinate to them.

In order to explain more concretely what I have just said, I must tell you how I came to invent the *Syntopicon*, which is an index to the discussion of the 102 great ideas.

In the summer of 1942, the summer before the siege of Stalingrad, I was preparing to write a book that, when published in 1943, bore the title *How to Think About War and Peace*. In preparation for writing that book, I spent some time going back to great books I had read, which I thought might have something to say on the subject, books by Thucydides, Plato, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, Hegel, Tolstoy, and so on.

To my surprise, when I turned to the pages of these books that I had already marked and underlined certain passages, I found other passages on war and peace of which I had taken no notice at all. How could this happen? How could I have missed earlier the fine passages that I had just now discovered?

The answer, I realized, was that on my previous readings of these books, I had other subjects in mind. I was not thinking about war and peace. If I had been questioning the authors about what they thought about war and peace on my previous reading of their work, I could not possibly have missed the passages I had just discovered.

Well, I said to myself, what if the great books were read again and again by a large staff of readers with every important question in mind? Would we then not discover all the passages that expressed their authors' thoughts on all these subjects?



I need not here go into all the steps by which the *Syntopicon* project was approved, financed, and staffed. I need only tell you that when the staff of 35 readers were trained and set to work, with the objective of discovering the passages in the great books that had something of significance to say about 102 great ideas, they did, in five years, what amounted to over 400,000 man-hours of reading to assemble all the relevant passages to which they made index references.

For them to begin this lengthy and arduous endeavor, it was necessary to decide what these ideas were, and then to compile a list of them. With the assistance of my closest associates on the staff, I made an initial list of over 500 ideas that were clearly important in the books we were considering.

We went over this list again and again and progressively boiled it down to 102 ideas—ideas that we determined had been the principal objects of thought and foci of discussion for the last 25 centuries of Western thought, ideas under which other ideas could be subordinated, ideas that truly covered the high points in the intelligible world as we know it.

When the *Syntopicon* was finished, we constructed a list of several thousand other ideas that were subordinate to the 102 we had cho-

sen. This list appears in the second volume of the *Syntopicon* under the title “Inventory of Terms.”

In short, what makes the 102 ideas we had chosen great ideas is their basic or fundamental character. Though 50 years have elapsed since the 102 great ideas were chosen, nothing that has happened in the last half-century, with one exception, necessitates a single change in that list by addition or subtraction.

The one exception is the idea of EQUALITY. New topics have been added under some of the ideas by virtue of advances or changes in 20th-century thought, but not a single new idea. The one exception, EQUALITY, appears in the Inventory of Terms; it there refers to many topics under other ideas.

I should add here a word about the topics. What we started out with as an index to the great ideas was so different from any other index that had ever been constructed, that we made up a new name for what we were producing. We invented the name “Syn-topicon” because the Greek roots of that made-up name mean “collection of topics.” Each of the great ideas has many aspects, themes, issues, problems

For each of them, we developed what we called on “Outline of Topics.” Some great ideas have a more intricate and complicated structure than others and, therefore, a longer list of topics than others.

As the work progressed, we enlarged and modified these outlines of topics to accommodate relevant passages found in this or that author. We ended up with almost 3,000 topics, organized under the 102 great ideas.

The number of the topics under each idea, as well as the number of subordinate terms that refer to these topics, measures the richness and complexity of each of the great ideas.

*WHY 102 GREAT IDEAS?
WHY NOT MORE OR LESS THAN THAT?*

The answer to this question is that the number could have been more or less than 102, but probably not much less than 92 or much more than 112. In other words, the number of 102 plus or minus 10. Why so?

Let me explain. One of the great ideas is GOVERNMENT. In outlining the topics that present the interior structure of that idea, we could have placed topics dealing with all the major forms of GOVERNMENT, such as TYRANNY AND DESPOTISM, MONARCHY, OLIGARCHY, ARISTOCRACY, and DEMOCRACY.

But that would have made the chapter on GOVERNMENT extraordinarily long and unwieldy; so we chose instead to develop separate chapters on the different forms of government mentioned above. By doing so we increased the number of great ideas; if we had made the other choice, we would have decreased the number.

Another example is the chapter on VIRTUE AND VICE. Here we could have included among the topics of that chapter, the consideration of particular virtues: COURAGE, TEMPERANCE, PRUDENCE, JUSTICE, and WISDOM. That would have reduced the number of great ideas. But we decided that to do this would make the chapter on VIRTUE AND VICE too long and cumbersome; so we made the other choice.

In short, the number 102 is somewhat arbitrary, in terms of choices that we made for practical reasons. But its arbitrariness is limited. We could not have done the job with only 50 great ideas, or with 150. At no time in all the eight years of work on the production of the *Syntopicon* was there an outcry on the part of the editorial staff that some idea other than the 102 we had chosen was needed to accommodate a large and significant body of Western thought that could not be subsumed under the various topics of the 102 ideas that we had selected.

I have thus answered as best I can what a great idea is, how the 102 were chosen, and why there are only 102 of them; that is, 102 plus or minus 10.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Jeff Stewart

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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