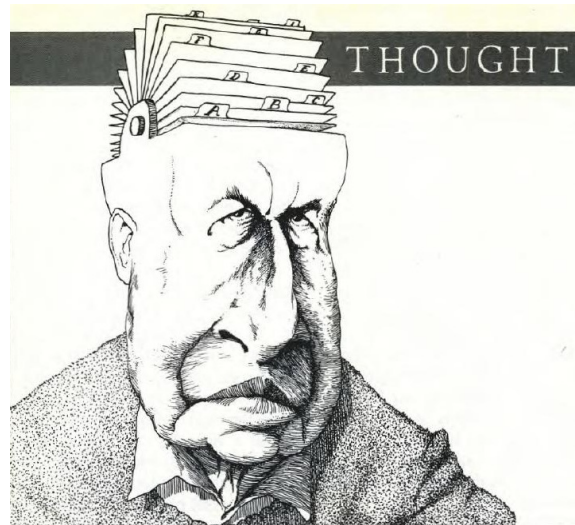


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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The single most exciting intellectual job I have ever undertaken.
--Mortimer Adler



THE GREAT IDEAS

Mortimer J. Adler

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*WHY WAS SOMETHING THAT STARTED OUT AS AN INDEX
TO THE GREAT IDEAS RENAMED THE SYNTOPICON?*

I noted above the brief answer to this question, but further explanation is, perhaps, needed. The nub of the explanation lies in the word "topic."

The Greek word *topos* means a place. There is a mathematical science of topology. But in logic a topic is a place where minds meet in agreement or disagreement about the theme, the issue, or the problem stated in the topic.

When we started out to construct an index to the great ideas as these are discussed in the great books, we came up against a snag that we should have foreseen.

All ordinary indices are to books written by a single individual or by a set of co-authors. The terms which are the flags to which the page references in the book are attached are terms to be found in the text. They are the author's own terms. Thus constructed, the terms are arranged in strictly alphabetical order to facilitate the reader's use of the index.

When we started out, we proceeded in the traditional manner of constructing an index. We found that impossible to do. The reason was twofold. In the first place, we were dealing with the works of 74 authors, scattered over the last 25 centuries, writing in different languages and in different cultural contexts. Different authors used different terms to express the same meaning. No common set of terms could be found for such a disparate and heterogeneous group.

In the second place, we were seeking passages in the great books relevant to 102 great ideas. But as we proceeded we found that the thinking done about great ideas is highly variegated: it touches on different aspects of the idea, different themes, issues, definitions, problems. Unless these were explicitly stated, we could not organize the references to the passages in the great books about a given idea in a significant manner.

To solve these two problems, we had recourse to the logical device known as a topic. A topic is never stated in a sentence, but in an elaborate phrase that neither asserts nor denies anything. It functions like a question to which a variety of opposing or different answers can be given.

By using the logical device of the topic, we found ourselves able to do the indexing that could not be done otherwise. Since this was the first time that anyone had ever tried to produce one index to the thought of a large number of authors, it was also the first time that a topical index was constructed.

It was not only the number of authors, but also the structural complexity of the great ideas that necessitated outlining, for each idea, the set of topics that represented its intellectual content—its definition, issues, problems, and other themes.

The actual work of indexing could not be begun until we had at least a first tentative list of the great ideas and tentative outlines of topics for each of them, both tentative in the sense that they would be subject to change in the course of the indexing done in the next two or three years.

In fact, the Outlines of Topics went through as many as 18 revisions—topics added, topics rephrased, topics eliminated, in order to accommodate the thought to be found in the great books without prejudice or distortion.

As the work matured, we realized that the word “index” in its well-established traditional sense was not the right word for what we were in the process of constructing. That is why we invented the word “*Syntopicon*,” meaning (as I pointed out earlier) a collection of topics.

HOW IS THE SYNTOPICON ORGANIZED?

The *Syntopicon* consists of 102 chapters, one on each of the 102 great ideas. Each chapter has exactly the same structure. It consists of five parts, in the following order: (1) an introductory essay, (2) an Outline of Topics, (3) a section entitled “References,” in which, topic by topic, passages relevant to the topic are cited by page references to the *Great Books* in which they are found; (4) a section entitled “Cross-References” in which readers are sent to topics in other chapters that are related to the topics in this chapter, and (5) finally, a section called “Additional Readings,” in which the titles of other works, not included in the volumes of *Great Books*, are recommended for reading in connection with this great idea and its component topics.

These recommended works are good books but not great books, because their grasp of the great ideas is limited either in range, or in depth, or both. Thus they contribute only in a subordinate or tangential way to the great conversation that the authors of the great books engage in. Such good books lie on the fringe of the great conversation; they do not fully participate in it. I will have more to say on this point later.

One further point about the structure of the *Syntopicon* is the fact that the 102 ideas are arranged in strictly alphabetical order—from ANGEL at one end to WORLD at the other. This arrangement avoids any judgment about the relation of any one of the great ideas to all the others.

The great ideas can, of course, be grouped by reference to the academic subject-matters to which they appear to have maximum relevance. Thus, for example, such ideas as HAPPINESS, GOOD AND EVIL, VIRTUE AND VICE, DUTY, COURAGE, TEMPERANCE, PRUDENCE, and JUSTICE contribute a great deal to the study of ethics or moral philosophy; such ideas as GOVERNMENT, LAW, MONARCHY, OLIGARCHY, ARISTOCRACY, DEMOCRACY, and TYRANNY AND DESPOTISM contribute to political science and philosophy; such ideas as DESIRE, EXPERIENCE, EMOTION, HABIT, JUDGMENT, LOVE, MEMORY AND IMAGINATION, MIND, PLEASURE AND PAIN, SENSE, SOUL, and WILL would appear to be in the sphere of psychology; such ideas as ASTRONOMY AND COSMOLOGY, INFINITY, MATHEMATICS, MATTER, MECHANICS, PHYSICS, QUANTITY, SPACE, TIME, and WORLD would appear to be in the sphere of the natural sciences; and so on.

But as our work progressed, we discovered that most of the great ideas have, directly or indirectly, relations with most of the others and that none is without relationships that would be transgressed if they were grouped according to a particular sphere of subject-matter, to which, at first glance, they might appear to have maximum relevance. We, therefore, thought it wise to arrange the great ideas in the completely neutral manner of an alphabetical order, and let readers discover for themselves how, beginning with any one of the 102 great ideas, they are led by circuitous pathways to the consideration of almost all the others.

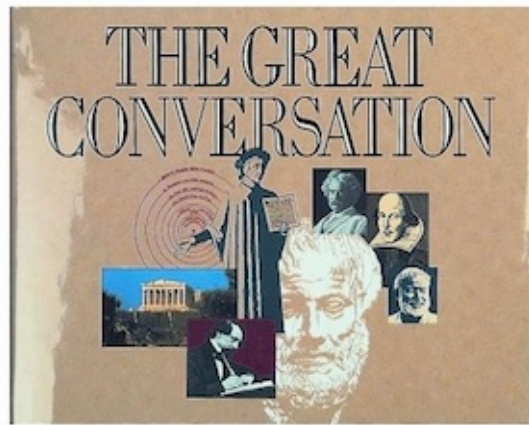
WHAT FUNCTION DID THE INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS PERFORM IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SYNTOPICON?

In the light of the description of the five parts that constitute the structure of each of the *Syntopicon*'s 102 chapters, it would seem obvious that the central—the indispensable—parts in each chapter are the Outlines of Topics and the immediately following section, entitled “references” where, topic by topic, the citation of relevant passages in the *Great Books* is set forth.

But why the opening section of each chapter entitled “Introduction”—the 102 essays on the great ideas that compose the present

book in the hands of readers? Why did we consider it advisable to include this first part in each of the 102 chapters? Why were they written? What function do they perform?

The first brief answer to this question is that they were written to whet the appetite of readers for the study of the great ideas as they are discussed in the great conversation about them to be found in the pages of the great books collected in the set entitled *Great Books of the Western World*.



There is a longer and more elaborate answer about the function of the essays. I have mentioned earlier that, with help of a large research staff at the Institute for Philosophical Research, and after eight years of work, I wrote and published two volumes entitled *The Idea of Freedom* or, as I said before, two volumes on freedom as an object of thought.

The work done on the *Syntopicon* in the 1940's led to the establishment of an Institute for the purpose of surveying and analyzing what had been thought on each of the great ideas in the 25 centuries of Western poetry, fiction, drama, theology, philosophy, and the natural and social sciences; and then presenting this thinking in a dialectically neutral or impartial manner without nodding one's head in the direction of or pointing out where the truth lies among this vast assemblage of differing or opposing views and doctrines.

In other words, to encompass all points of view in a manner that is point-of-viewless—not tinged or colored by partiality or partisanship for any one of the many points of view encompassed in the survey.

It took a large research staff and eight strenuous years of conferences and writing to produce *The Idea of Freedom*. If similar effort

and time were to be expended on each of the other 101 great ideas, that accomplishment would take more than a half millennium. It appeared to be, pragmatically, beyond accomplishment.

(In the 102 ideas of the *Syntopicon*, we chose to use the word “liberty” instead of the word “freedom,” pointing out that these two words are strictly synonymous.)

That being the case, was there any feasible alternative which, if not as good, would at least serve the same purpose? The answer that we came up with was the 102 introductory essays for each of the 102 chapters of the *Syntopicon*.

Though the introductory essay in the *Syntopicon*'s 47th chapter on LIBERTY, which covers little more than 6 pages, cannot be as comprehensive and as analytically elaborate as the 1,500 pages in the two volumes of *The Idea of Freedom*, it nevertheless can give its readers a fair sampling of the great conversation about liberty (or freedom) by covering in an exposition, enriched by quotations, what has been said, thought, and disputed about the most important topics (some, of course, not all) in the great conversation about that idea.

This, by itself, may be insufficient, but the introduction to the sweep and stress of the great conversation about liberty prepares one to go further, with the help of the *Syntopicon*, in the study of the great conversation about that idea.

Even if you do not go further by using the *Syntopicon* after you have perused these essays, you will at least have become acquainted with the main strands of the great conversation about the 102 great ideas and you may even be able to participate in it yourselves; for the essays on the 102 ideas do not tell you what to think, but only what is to be thought about in connection with each of these ideas. You are invited, and I hope, induced by the reading of them to make up your own mind on the main topics considered in each of these essays.

One further thing must be pointed out here, which careful readers of the essays will find out for themselves. In the assemblage of passages on the main topics of each great idea, readers will find more mistakes and errors than truth.

The relation between truth and error is a one-many relation; for any one truth, many errors. Among the answers to most important questions, there is always likely to be only some truth accompa-

nied by a multitude of errors or mistakes, because, on any subject, whatever is judged to be true will generate judgments about all the wrong answers.

The truth on any subject is only well-understood when it is understood in the light of all the errors made on the same subject.

TWO MORE USEFUL FEATURES OF THE SYNTOPICON

The *Syntopicon* contains two additional features, which are very useful devices. These are placed in the *Syntopicon*'s second volume, immediately following Chapter 102 on WORLD. One is a Bibliography of Additional Readings; the other is an Inventory of Terms. Both required careful editorial work to produce initially and then to revise and bring up to date for the second edition in 1990. Let me tell you first the way in which the Inventory of Terms may prove useful to users of the *Syntopicon*.

I said at the beginning that we started with more than 500 terms when we were compiling a list of the great ideas; after many discussions we reduced that number to the 102 terms that we finally decided on as the names for the 102 great ideas.

But the terms not chosen could not be totally ignored. They all had some relation or subordination to the 102 great ideas we had selected. So we went further and compiled a list of terms like the ones we were left with, and constructed a much longer list of secondary and subordinate terms that now comprises the Inventory of Terms. As now completed and recently revised, it contains more than 2,000 terms.

Suppose someone using the *Syntopicon* finds at first that he has no pressing interest in any of the 102 great ideas, thought I must confess I think that very unlikely. Nevertheless, suppose readers' initial interest lies elsewhere.

If readers then go to the Inventory of Terms, which is arranged alphabetically, they will probably find a term that is the name for the object of thought in which they are immediately interested. Affixed to that term, they will find references to one or more great ideas to which that term is related or subordinated; and, for the one or more ideas, they will be sent to the topic or topics in which that particular matter is considered.

Let me give a few illustrations of how this works, using terms in the Inventory that name matters of current interest, matters that are

of great significance today. This has not been the case in prior centuries and so that is why the terms in question were not considered great ideas, for only they have had great significance in *all* of the 25 preceding centuries.

We are living, for the first time in the 20th century, in a society that has a welfare system, in which our national budget includes a large sum for welfare entitlements. We may have questions about how this is working and whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages.

In the Inventory of Terms, readers will find the term “Dole” which will send them to the chapter on LABOR and to the topic 7e. and to WEALTH and the topic 8d.; or they will find the term “Welfare” which will send them to the same two great ideas.

Their interest in the biological and physical sciences may be gratified to find an entry for “DNA” which sends them to ANIMAL and there to topic 10.; or to the idea of EVOLUTION, and there to topic 2a. If physical rather than biological science is their main interest, they will find the term “Quantum mechanics” with references to CHANCE, MECHANICS, and PHYSICS.

Another example is applicable to those interested in 20th-century existentialist philosophy, in which the notion of *angst* or dread is central. They will find the term “Dread” with references to BEING and to EMOTION.

Still two more examples. One is “Sex, sexuality.” Under that term, readers will find references to ANIMAL, DESIRE, EVOLUTION, LOVE, and MAN. The other is “Power.” Here there are references to 20 of the great ideas.

These few examples should suffice to illustrate the usefulness of the Inventory of Terms, but many more will catch the attention of readers who just thumb through the pages of the Inventory. They will see a great many terms connected with matters in which they have a current interest. In every case they will be sent to one or more great ideas and their component topics, in which such matters are discussed.

I said earlier that each of the *Syntopicon*'s 102 chapters has a final section entitled “Additional Readings,” giving the title of works not included in *Great Books* that are worth reading in connection with the idea that is the subject of the chapter.

In most cases, these lists of recommended readings comprise 100 or more titles. But the only information given in these lists is the name of the author, the title of the book, and the period of time in which it was written or published.

That is not enough information to enable readers to go to libraries or bookstores or procure a particular book in which they are especially interested. To assist readers in their search, we compiled what is called “Bibliography of Additional Readings.”

This is organized alphabetically by the names of the authors. Here you will find precise information about the date of the works mentioned, their editions or translations, and other facts that enable you to run down the particular book being sought.

Accurate bibliographies are hard to come by. There are few as extensive and detailed as this one, as readers can see for themselves by inspecting it; and this one is also particularly useful to readers whose interest in the great ideas has been sufficiently aroused to investigate the vast literature in which the great ideas are thoroughly discussed.

A SUMMA DIALECTICA

The first book I wrote was published in 1927, entitled *Dialectic*. One use of that word “dialectic” signifies the method of conducting conversations in which different views are advanced in regard to clearly stated issues or topics. At the end of that book, I proposed that, after 25 centuries of Western thought, some accounting should be done—a systematic account of the diversity of opposing views that had been expressed on all the major problems and issues that had been confronted and disputed.

I coined the phrase “*Summa Dialectica*” for this projected work, modeling it on the phrase “*Summa Theologica*.” In the 12th and 13th centuries many of the great theologians wrote summations of Christian sacred theology. The radical difference between a 20th-century *Summa Dialectica* that I projected and mediaeval summations of Christian sacred theology consisted in the radical difference with respect to truth of these two kinds of summation.

The principles of a mediaeval *Summa Theologica* were the articles of Christian faith, dogmatically declared; and the philosophical effort evoked by faith seeking understanding involved trying to present the best approximation to the truth about these matters that could be attained.

A *Summa Dialectica* would proceed in exactly the opposite fashion. It would try to present the clearest possible statement of disputable problems and issues, but on each of these it would call for suspended judgment about truth and falsity. It would present all points of view without taking any point of view. It would be dialectically neutral or impartial.

Now, more than 60 years later, as I look back at my youthful projection of a *Summa Dialectica* to produce for the pluralist 20th century what the *Summa Theologica* did for Christendom in the 13th century, I see that I may have accomplished it without knowing I was doing it, not as extensively as I had originally projected, but nevertheless essentially that.


I said earlier that *The Idea of Freedom*, produced in two volumes and 1,500 pages by the Institute for Philosophical Research, involved eight years of work by a large staff of persons.

To produce similarly extensive work on all the other 101 great ideas would obviously require more than half a millennium. But the essays in this volume may serve as a briefer dialectical summation of Western thought in the great conversation about the 102 great ideas.

The same radical difference between a *Summa Dialectica* and a *Summa Theologica* will be found between the essays on the 102 great ideas and the books about great ideas that I have written in the last 20 years. That radical difference is with respect to suspended judgment about where the truth lies and a plain effort to get at the truth; or in other words, between a dialectical and a doctrinal approach to the study of the great ideas.

I have written doctrinal books about such great ideas as truth, goodness, and beauty, liberty, equality, and justice, labor, happiness, and virtue, mind, and so on. (*Six Great Ideas* (1981), *A Vision of the Future* (1984), and *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (1990)). In each of these works, I have argued for the truth or correctness of one understanding of the idea under consideration, and against divergent, opposed, or inadequate understandings of it.

I did not write in a dialectically neutral or non-partisan manner, the manner in which I wrote the 102 essays in the *Syntopicon*. That is why I felt somewhat justified in thinking that the *Syntopicon* essays, however inadequate they may be, is an approximate realiza-

tion of my youthful dream of producing a *Summa Dialectica* for 20th-century readers. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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