



GREAT BOOKS, PAST AND PRESENT

Mortimer Adler

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1. A Liberal Education for Adults

The great books movement aims in the direction of universalizing liberal education for adults—making it as commonplace as schooling for children and youth, and extending it, as far as the franchise goes, to all citizens. The success achieved so far may be a source of satisfaction, but more than that it gives confidence to the hope that in the years to come those reading and discussing great books in community groups will be numbered in the hundred thousands and even millions.

The great books, however, have been the subject of much educational controversy in recent years; and almost in proportion as they have increasingly taken hold, both in our colleges and in adult education, they have also been attacked or at least disapproved. It is to be expected that such rejections should occur along with their widespread acceptance.

To review the basic idea behind the great books movement, I turn to our critics for help, ignoring that part of the educational controversy which concerns the place of the great books in a college curriculum. Much discussion, however, is relevant to the great books as a means of liberal education for adult men and women.

Friendly criticism can be and has been helpful, but unfortunately most of the published attacks have not been of that sort. They give us little or no help. This does not mean that the great books program cannot be amended or improved. It means only that our most vocal critics have not understood well enough what we are doing to have found the real difficulties or flaws. I think we can do a better job of criticizing ourselves. We can make a better estimate of the difficulties to be overcome. We can qualify our aims so that they have a better chance of fulfillment.

Most of the criticisms which have been expressed represent misunderstandings. They do not create genuine issues between us and our would-be opponents. They accuse us for the most part of making claims for the great books that we do not make; they impute to us theories we do not hold; they attribute to us aims we do not have or goals we do not seek.

The fault may be ours for not having made ourselves clear; but quite apart from whose fault it is that so much of the criticism of the great books is based on misinformation and misunderstanding, the fact remains that almost all the attacks knock down straw men. We stand by untouched, ready to admit that our critics are quite right in attacking the picture of the great books movement that they have in their heads. But it is in their heads, not in reality. If anyone in reality misused or abused the great books in the ways mentioned by our critics, I think most of us would join them in a vigorous attack on such educational tomfoolery.

Let me illustrate the lack of real issues between our opponents and us by stating what would be very real issues, indeed, if anyone—they or we—were to make certain extreme statements.

For example, if we were to say that the great books are the only books worth reading by adults, or if they were to say that the great books are not worth reading at all, then there would be a genuine opposition of minds. But no one, at least no one to my knowledge, has ever said anything so preposterous.

Or if they were to say that the great books can make no contribution at all to the continuing development of the adult mind, or if we

were to say that nothing but the reading and discussion of the great books is required to give the adult a complete and rounded education, then again a real issue would be joined. But again no one seems to hold such extreme views.

Or if we were to say that engaging in the great books program by itself makes good men and good citizens, or if they were to say that the great books program has no bearing at all on the development of good men and good citizens, then once more we and our opponents would confront one another in flat contradiction. But neither we nor they say any such thing.

Finally, to take one more example, if they were to say that it is enough for a man to know the facts of life and current events or, if ideas and theories are important, the ones currently discussed will suffice; or if we were to say that no knowledge of current events or Information about matters of fact is necessary and that the only ideas or theories worth paying attention to are those considered in the past, then another clear conflict would exist. But neither they nor we have ever talked such nonsense.

Since none of these issues exists—because no one has ever asserted any of these quite false notions which, if ever uttered, it would be necessary for all men of sound sense to join in denying—what is all the shouting about? What are the actual complaints or criticisms, and what is our answer to them?

I do not pretend to give an exhaustive enumeration of them, but what I shall offer seems to me truly representative of the adverse opinions which have been publicly expressed. Most of these are easy to answer, because for the most part we need do little more than agree with our opponents, while at the same time calling their attention to the fact that it is not us they are attacking but a bogey man of their own creation. In only a few cases, as we shall see, is there a genuinely relevant point to consider and something positive to say in reply.

Objection: It has been said that the books to be read are chosen in an authoritarian manner and that it is undemocratic for people to have to submit to book lists made for them by their betters.

Reply: If this were true, it would be a telling point. But of all the book lists ever made, the list of the great books results from the most democratic or popular method of selection. Neither we nor anybody else can make a book great by calling it one. We did not

choose them. The great books were chosen by the largest reading audience of all times, as well as by a consensus of expert opinion.

A best-seller is a best-seller, not by authoritarian judgment, but by popular consent. So the fact that certain books have interested a vast multitude of men through the centuries is one of the signs that they are great books. It is not the only sign, but it is that mark of a great book which shows it to be not the choice of a special elite, but the choice of mankind generally.

Those of us who have compiled great books lists have simply recorded the prevailing judgment of the many and the wise. Ten percent of any great books list may involve questionable choices, in the sense that in this area there may be a reasonable difference of opinion concerning whether a certain book should or should not be included. But this margin of error is hardly damning nor does it defeat the purpose of the program.

Objection: It is said that the list of great books from which our reading courses are constructed is defective in two particular respects; first, in the omission of the best contemporary books; and second, in the omission of the great works of oriental thought and culture.

Reply: As a matter of fact, both charges are absolutely correct; but as a matter of principle, we think that good reasons can be given for these two omissions.

We omit contemporary books from our reading lists because it is almost impossible to judge whether a contemporary book is a great book. The tests of time cannot be applied, nor do we have sufficient perspective. This does not mean that some contemporary books will not some day become great books; not does it mean that the best of contemporary books are not eminently worth reading. The persons who engage in the reading and discussion of the great books are not precluded thereby from doing other reading. In fact, many of them do. They naturally tend to combine their reading of the great books with the reading of good current books. But since we are concerned with the contribution which the great books can make to our lives, we think it wise to restrict our list to those books that are unquestionably great.

As for the omission of oriental literature, the answer is simply that it is a difficult enough task for us to understand the roots and sources of our own civilization. Only after we are very well

grounded in the basic elements of our own culture can we safely embark on the effort to understand cultures and traditions that must necessarily be quite foreign to us.

Objection: It has been said that the great books program deals only with “old books,” that it encourages going back to the past, that it cultivates an interest in the dead and done with rather than in the living present.

Reply: While it is true that, with few exceptions, no books by contemporary or living authors are included, it is definitely not true that the great books program deals only with “old books.” The fact is that more than half of all the authors read lived and wrote in the last three hundred years—the period we call “modern times”—and that all the reading courses come down to authors who have only recently died, and to books which are exercising an immediate influence on contemporary thought. Furthermore, the reason why we have steadfastly avoided the use of the word “classics” and have insisted instead upon “great books” is that the word “classics” usually connotes a reverence for antiquity for its own sake. But we are not interested in any of these books as antiquarians.

Like our opponents, we disapprove of those who seek to dwell in the past in order to escape from the pressing realities of the present. Our interest in the great books goes no further than the contribution they can make to understanding and meeting present problems. That they can make a great contribution, even though most of them were written from two to twenty centuries ago, simply means that many, if not all, of our fundamental problems today have always been the problems confronting men in the realms of thought or action.

Objection: It has been said that no one is competent to deal with the crucial problems of our own times until he has familiarized himself with the best current thinking on current problems. In the same general vein, it has been said that it is necessary to come to grips with the challenge of real life; that it is necessary to be well informed about current events, and to become intimately and directly acquainted with the present-day scene.

Reply: With all of this we agree. No one of sound mind could say anything to the contrary.

You cannot have ham and eggs unless you have some ham and unless you have some eggs. You cannot think as well as possible about the problems of the present unless you have *both of two things*: on the one hand, whatever the past can contribute by the best thinking it has been able to do about its problems, which are either identical with our problems or very closely similar; on the other hand, as great a familiarity with the present scene as can be obtained from direct experience and from the reading of other materials than the great books.

Objection: It has been said that the great books represent a single philosophy which is dogmatically imposed upon the students in great books groups, to the exclusion of alternative views and without facing the issues between opposing views.

Reply: Anyone who has read the great books knows that there is no philosophical position, religious doctrine, moral belief, or social theory stated in them which is not also contradicted in them. For every view that the mind of man has taken on any fundamental problem, the great books contain, not one, but many opposite views. It would be strange, therefore, for anyone who wished to impose a single philosophy or point of view upon the human mind to recommend the reading of the great books.

It may be said that dogmatism or the imposition of a single line of opinion is achieved by the way the great books discussions are conducted. But again it is strange that the great books classes should be conducted by the method of discussion, consisting largely in the exchange of opinions and in the criticism of any opinion that is proposed, whether by the leaders or the members of the class. It would be so much easier to impose a dogmatically held doctrine by the lecture method. In fact that is the way it is usually done, not by the Socratic method of teaching. So much so is this the case that another group of our opponents think that the method of the great books discussion group is *too dialectical*—too open-minded to a variety of opposite opinions—and they favor lectures rather than discussions.

Those who have one particular doctrine which they would like to see propagated fear that the great books discussion groups tend toward a kind of shallow eclecticism—the mere play of opinion rather than the pursuit of the truth. Those who espouse no doctrine at all, except perhaps the doctrine that no doctrine should be espoused, fear that great books discussion groups may try to discover

the truth by a dialectical process of dealing with and clarifying opinions.

Both fears are justified; but the fact that the great books program is criticized from these opposite extremes is some evidence of the fact that it tries to hold the middle ground between dogmatism and sophistry.

Objection: It has been said that in the tradition of the great books, there is not only much truth but much error, and that the present generation must be safeguarded against adopting false values or attitudes from the past.

Reply: We agree completely. Since almost every position taken in the great books is also contradicted in the great books, the great books necessarily contain as much falsity as they contain truth. Our task in reading and discussing them must, therefore, be to judge for ourselves where the truth lies and by the development of our critical faculties to make up our own minds on most basic questions. That is the aim of the great books discussion groups. That is the principal point which dictates the method by which they are conducted. We also think that if the reading and discussion of the great books develops a critical faculty, it should be exercised not only on the great books themselves, but on other things, especially contemporary books, political speeches, newspapers, and magazines. It is just as important for us to be critical of all the errors and false values in contemporary thought as of the mistakes and illusions of the past. The reading and discussion of the great books is intended to serve both these purposes at once.

Objection: It has been said that the great books courses at their best constitute only a minimum program of liberal education for adults, and that much more than this should be done to give adults a rounded education in the years after school.

Reply: We agree with this. At University College of the University of Chicago we offer courses of study which involve much more, and therefore take much more time, than the great books reading groups do.

There can be no issue here about minimum and maximum for we have never claimed that the great books program was a complete curriculum of liberal education. Many of the things our opponents would like to see added to round it out, we would like to see added

for any adult who had enough time to give to his continuing education.

But most adults have very little time to give, over and above the demands which work, family, and civic responsibilities make upon them. Hence it is reasonable to propose an essential or indispensable minimum of liberal education which they should undertake in the course of every passing year. We do claim that the reading and discussion of the great books constitutes that minimum; and we claim that this minimum is indispensable, though not sufficient, for any adult whose mind is to grow and develop with the years. We are even tempted to claim—and here some of our opponents may wish to disagree that no alternative program of adult education can succeed as well in providing the indispensable minimum.

Objection: It has been said that, for whatever values there may be in the study of great books, there are other and better ways of studying them than in the manner proposed by the Great Books Foundation or the University of Chicago. For example, in distinction from the Chicago Plan, it has been proposed that only twenty or twenty-five great books be read in a four-year course of study beginning with the ancients and coming down to the moderns, that these books be read as complete wholes, and that they be very carefully examined by all the techniques of textual commentary and criticism.

Reply: This plan of study should certainly be tried once more, and perhaps those who try it may succeed better than we did when we first organized the study of the great books precisely in that way. We gave it up because we found by experiment that it did not work. We found, again by experiment, that adults need to be introduced to the whole tradition of Western culture before they can profit from a more extensive study of any of its parts. That is why we try in the first six or seven years of the great books program to cover a great many books and authors, even though we do not read all the books through as wholes, and even though we know that our reading and discussion even of the parts is quite superficial. Moving over the surface should precede plumbing the depths at any point.

The selection we have chosen for the first six years of great books readings, the way the readings are organized in each year, and the way the successive years are related to one another, all these things are calculated gradually to open up the whole field of human learning for the beginning reader.

On one point, however, we differ sharply from the critics who propose a four-year course of study of the great books. Our first six years of readings is only a beginning; and there is no end. We propose that adults shall continue to read the great books throughout their lives. After they have covered the surface in the first six to ten years, they will be able in the next ten or twenty to profit from reading a smaller and smaller number of books and reading them much more intensively—not only as wholes, but with concentration on the interpretation and criticism of the text.

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