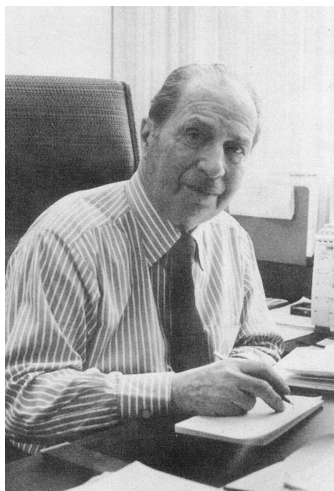


THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Nov '11

Nº 646



GREAT BOOKS, PAST AND PRESENT

Mortimer Adler

2 of 2

Objection: It is said that the proponents of the great books program claim for their program that it is either the best or the only way to educate adults liberally. This claim is denied, and it is held, on the contrary, that other programs and methods are either better or just as good.

Reply: Here we strike what, among all the claims and counter-claims so far considered, may be the first real issue; for we do claim that the great books program is the ideal minimum for adult liberal education, aimed not at one year, or at four, but at a lifetime of study.

Our contention that the great books program is the ideal minimum—the best or the only one—may seem to be so extreme as to deserve vigorous contradiction. Nevertheless, as I shall try to show, we are here making a very moderate claim and one which, it seems to me, can be reasonably defended.

To answer this last objection I shall, therefore, try to state as briefly as possible the claims we make for the great books program. I cannot believe that there will be much disagreement with this statement from anyone who has the decency to pay attention to it before trying to dispute or refute it. But if there is, then we may find some real issues instead of the false ones based on misinformation about, or misunderstanding of, the great books program.

For a program of adult education which consists in the reading and discussion of the great books, we claim simply that it is good for the mind.

It is good for the mind in a number of ways. It requires the individual to develop certain basic intellectual skills. Since we are interested not merely in reading the great books but in reading them well, we are concerned with the art of reading. Since we are interested not merely in discussing the great books, but in talking to one another intelligently and intelligibly about the great ideas, problems, and subject matters they consider, we are concerned with skill in communication.

Over and above the development of these arts or skills, the great books program is good for the mind by increasing the individual's opportunity for gaining insight, understanding, and perhaps ultimately a little wisdom. *We cannot promise any of these things.* We do not claim to be able *to give* individuals such extraordinary gifts as insight, understanding, and wisdom. The most we can say—and this is a great deal—is that the reading and discussion of the great books provides conditions favorable for the acquisition of these mental qualities.

The great books contain the best materials on which the human mind can work in order to gain insight, understanding, and wisdom. But they are not a pumping station. The individual mind must work, must be active, if it is to keep awake and grow. Insight, understanding, and certainly wisdom are not easily come by. They cannot be achieved in a year or two. One cannot have too much of them.

Hence it is obvious that anyone who is interested in the pursuit of these good things of the mind must be prepared for a lifetime's undertaking; and certainly anyone who wishes to keep his mind awake and growing as long as he is alive must also be willing to keep it active throughout life. Such a long-term undertaking as the pursuit of understanding and wisdom and the continual growth of the mind throughout life requires not only the best materials to

stimulate the mind's activity and for the mind to work upon, but also a set of materials which shall be inexhaustible year after year.

Our basic claim is that the great books constitute precisely that set of materials. By everyone's admission they are the repository of whatever insight, understanding, and wisdom Western man has so far accumulated. By everyone's admission they set forth the ideas, the problems, the principles, and subject matters of the arts and sciences, which make our culture what it is. By everyone's admission, they are books which cannot be mastered on the first reading; and anyone who will make the experiment for himself will find that he can return to them again and again with profit—in fact he must do so if he is to learn what they have to teach.

There may be materials to read and discuss, other than the great books and the great ideas, which can provide the individual with an opportunity for gaining insight, understanding, and wisdom, and which can stimulate and profit the mind for a lifetime. But I do not know what they are. Certainly there can be no better books. Apart from books of any sort, experience, acquaintance with the facts of life and active participation in its tasks, are necessary conditions for the vitality and growth of the mind. But except for the rare individual, almost the genius, they are not by themselves sufficient, even as the best reading of the great books is not by itself sufficient.

Our claim, then, for the great books program, conceived as a lifetime undertaking, is that it is the only or certainly the best way for the individual to acquire understanding and wisdom. If there are other ways of doing this, they have yet to be proposed. If when proposed they turn out to be better, then by all means they should be preferred.

Let me try to protect this moderate claim from being misunderstood by mentioning the things we do not claim for the great books program.

We do not claim that the great books provide *all the knowledge that is worth having*. Far from it. I have very carefully avoided the use of the word "knowledge" in referring to the goods of the mind at which the great books program aims. I do not mean that some knowledge, and perhaps very fundamental knowledge, may not be obtained from the great books; but I wish to emphasize the fact that for many special areas of knowledge other books or sources of in-

formation may be much more useful, and in many cases indispensable.

We do not claim that the great books will develop all the virtues or excellences of which men are capable, certainly not the moral virtues. A good mind is one thing. A good man and a good citizen is another. But unless having a good mind, having some understanding and wisdom, is a disadvantage to an individual in his efforts to lead a good life, the great books program does not lessen his chances. And if, on the contrary, there is some advantage to a man, both as a citizen and in his private life, to have the best mind of which he is capable, then whatever the great books program can do to improve the mind will certainly help a man in the pursuit of happiness and in the performance of his civic duties.

But we do not claim that the reading and discussion of the great books will necessarily make men better men or better citizens, for we do not claim that they necessarily produce better minds. We have merely said that they provide the best opportunity for the improvement of the mind; and if that opportunity is taken, *and many other factors cooperate*, the result may be a better man and a better citizen.

We do not claim that the great books will save the world, prevent the next war, or avoid atomic suicide. We do not claim that the great books will safeguard democracy from its enemies or guarantee the attainment of social and economic justice. But if democracy requires citizens who are not only free men politically and economically but also citizens who have free minds, then the great books program helps democracy to flourish to whatever extent it is able to cultivate the critical faculties—the ability of the individual to judge all questions on their merit and to exercise an independent judgment. And if our culture or civilization is worth saving from atomic destruction, then it is also worth saving from dissipation and neglect.

A culture can endure and thrive only to the extent that it is possessed by individuals, some of whom may add to it, but all of whom should be the vehicles of passing it on to the next generation. To the extent that the great books constitute the monuments of our culture, the substance of our intellectual tradition, the more individuals who in any degree actually possess some of that culture through the reading and discussion of the great books, the more favorable are the conditions for its transmission and progress.

We have often described the great books as enacting a great conversation through the ages—a conversation about the basic ideas, the fundamental problems, the major subject matters which concern the mind and heart of man. They are the ideas with which any individual must think about his own life and the world in which he lives. They are the problems which any society must face. They are the subject matters which represent the things worth inquiring into and learning about, certainly for anyone who wishes to understand a little about the nature of the world, of society, and of himself.

The reading and discussion of the great books draws the individual into that conversation, and because the other participants in it are the greatest minds of all time, there is a good chance for most of us that we can profit by association with our betters. But in addition to that profit, there is also the pleasure or delight of being able to talk to one another about the great themes which have always occupied and frequently perplexed the mind of man.

Good conversation is intrinsically enjoyable, and it is an enjoyment which many of us too seldom experience. The pleasure of being understood by others; and of understanding others; the solace which each of us in his loneliness can get from a meeting of minds on common ground; the enrichment of human association by making companionship intellectual as well as emotional—these are some of the promises which I do not think it is too much to make for the great books program.

I would like to add just one more. Adults are related to one another in families as well as in the state and in other organizations or societies. To the extent that the great books program helps to increase the ability of men and women to communicate intelligently and intelligibly with one another, it enriches all forms of association. In the case of the family it may perform a very special service. Here adults are related to children, and as parents have responsibility for their training and development.

The circumstances of modern life have greatly weakened the vitality of the home, and particularly the position of parents in relation to their children. For the most part, they are no longer the symbols of knowledge and wisdom, the sources of guidance and counsel. With the increase of schooling up to the collegiate level, with the intervention of other social agencies in the life of the child, with the general breakdown of discipline and even of good manners, the parent exercises less and less authority over his children and gets less and less respect from them.

The only authority the parent should have is, of course, an authority based upon his greater experience and wisdom. Only such things deserve respect—not sheer age or physical power. I do not claim for the great books program that it can reverse the general tendency of our times toward the dissolution of the family and toward the loss of a proper relationship between parents and children; but I do say that parents who have greater understanding and more wisdom stand a better chance of gaining the respect of their children, as well as of serving them better, than those whose minds actually lag behind their superficially better educated children.

The boy or girl who has gone through school or even graduated from college has very little understanding and almost no wisdom. At that age, such qualities of mind are not to be expected. They cannot be achieved even by the best schooling in the world. Greater maturity is required for the possession of these things, a maturity involving experience, the shouldering of responsibilities, participation in the tasks of life. Having these advantages of maturity, the parent can profit much more from putting his mind to good use than can his children in school or college. Even if children were to read the great books, that would not enable them to gain the understanding and wisdom which is open to their parents. Hence the great books program may offer an opportunity for parents to improve their own minds in a way which will not only benefit them as adults in an adult world, but as parents in relation to their children.

I have stated as moderately as possible the things we claim for the great books program as a program of adult liberal education to occupy each individual for a lifetime. I have stated as carefully as I know how the things we do not claim, so that there may be an end to criticisms or objections based on misconceptions of what we are seeking to do.

I said at the beginning that we who are involved in this program should be able to state its difficulties or shortcomings better than those who criticize it from the outside, and who unfortunately often do not take the time and trouble to examine the facts. I should like now, in conclusion, briefly to indicate some of these difficulties.

First, the success of the great books program depends upon the voluntary cooperation of the individuals who engage in it. The great books cannot make them think. Thinking is hard. It is probably one of the most painful things that human beings are ever

called upon to do. Since what an individual gets out of reading and discussing the great books necessarily depends on what he puts into it in time and effort, we cannot hope to succeed with all individuals, or to the same degree with all.

Second, the leaders of the great books discussion groups are not, like the authors of the great books, the greatest minds of all times. For the most part, they are ordinary men and women who have volunteered to take the responsibility of helping their fellow men do what they themselves regard as worth doing.

They serve the program well to the extent that they themselves teach through learning. Their function as teachers, or as we call them "leaders," is not to lecture, not to indoctrinate, not to declare what is right and true, not to impose their own opinions or their own interpretations of the book, not to hand out what they may think is their own superior understanding of an idea or their own superior wisdom about a problem. Rather by asking questions, by examining the answers, by directing the discussion and by keeping the conversation both on the point and moving along, they increase the chances of anyone in the group, including themselves, to improve in the skills of reading and talking and to gain the understanding and wisdom which are the sole aims of the program.


Things being as they are, the leaders may often fall, and they may never succeed to any great extent. Despite all these reservations, I think it remains true that an individual will not only be more likely to read the great books but will also be more likely to read them well, if he undertakes to read them socially, that is, in the company of other individuals with whom he regularly meets for discussion.

Finally, the great books are difficult, not easy, to read. In fact, they are perhaps the most difficult books, in the sense that they are the richest, the most profound. They are not the most difficult in the sense of being the most technical. In that sense textbooks and specialized treatises by professors or scholars are much more difficult.

No one should expect to understand the great books very well on the first reading, nor even, perhaps, fully to master them after many readings. Their difficulty requires them to be read and re-read. It requires patience and perseverance. It demands mental effort and may, therefore, cause considerable pain. Like all the other good things of life, what the great books have to offer is hard to get. But the great books are also rewarding, even on the first reading; and they are increasingly profitable as one returns to them again and again.

It is precisely the difficulty of the great books which makes them more readable than other books and more worth reading. It is precisely because they raise problems which they do not finally answer that they can provoke us to think and inquire and discuss. It is precisely because their difficulty challenges our skill in reading that they can help us to improve that skill. It is precisely because they often challenge our accepted prejudices and our established opinions, that they can help us develop our critical faculties.

The difficulty of the great books comes not from the fact that they are poorly written or badly conceived but rather from the fact that they are the clearest and simplest writing about the most difficult themes which confront the human mind. It is precisely because they are difficult in this way that they offer us the opportunity to gain understanding and wisdom.

Understanding and wisdom are not reserved for a chosen few. They can be had in some degree by all men—according to the degree of native talent and in proportion to the effort made by each individual. The difficulty of the great books, therefore, does not limit the program to an intellectual elite, but it does limit it to those men and women who care enough about improving their minds—who want understanding and wisdom badly enough—to be willing to put their minds to work, and who have sense enough to see that mental activity must be sustained through all the years of their life, not just the years spent in school or college, if they are going to keep their minds awake and growing. 

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

Post Here: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tgioid/>

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzigan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.