

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Philosophy is Everybody's Business

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The ancients stole all our ideas from us.
—Mark Twain



GREAT THOUGHTS

The New Yorker April 14, 1962

FOUR big enterprises have put their heads together for an odd, though entirely commendable, purpose—the instruction, on a fairly lofty level of cerebration, of tourists out for a good time. The four enterprises are Sperry Rand, the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the American Library Association, and the Seattle World's Fair, and the

thing they have put their heads together over is a Sperry Rand UNIVAC, or electronic computer, which, for the edification of Fairgoers, has been stuffed full of quotations provided by the Britannica's famous Syntopicon—a device that is every bit as deserving of capital letters as a UNIVAC and is not unlike it in nature, being a prodigious index to important statements, a hundred and sixty-three thousand in number, on a hundred and two of the greatest ideas of Western Man, culled from the Bible and the works of seventy-four of our most significant authors and philosophers, and collected in the Britannica's "Great Books of the Western World" The UNIVAC that the Sperry Rand, Britannica, and Library Association people are jointly putting on display at the Fair, which opens on the twenty-first of this month, will contain only seven hundred and forty-four of these statements, but the statements will be gradually changed from month to month, and by the end of October, when the Fair closes, a really dogged tourist could salt away upward of a thousand dandy thoughts by double-domes from Aeschylus on. At the Fair, a tourist will go about gathering such thoughts by examining an index of authors and handing a UNIVAC attendant the names of four of them whose reflections on any one of six stipulated ideas he cares to learn; the attendant will then cause the machine to delve among its intestinal tapes and start printing the pertinent responses. This feat, which is child's play to a UNIVAC, is known in the trade as "information retrieval," and hints at the happy-go-lucky libraries that scholars of the future may enjoy, in which, instead of laboriously poring over thousands of obscure volumes in search of a single item of information, they will simply press an appropriate button and—presto!—up will pop the crucial snippet.

At their local offices, on Park Avenue South, the Sperry Rand people recently gave a demonstration of a UNIVAC programmed exactly like the UNIVAC at the Fair. Among those present were Mortimer J. Adler, editor of the Syntopicon, and J. Presper Eckert, an old computer hand, not to say vice-president of Sperry Rand's Remington Rand Division.

The audience having been invited to ask questions of the machine, a man just behind us got up and asked to know what Euripides, Karl Marx, and—er—Charles Darwin had had to say on the subject of family. A handy Sperry Rand man recorded this request on what we have the regrettable habit of calling an I.B.M. card, and fed it into the machine, along with several similar requests. Dr. Adler then rose and noted that, remarkable as UNIVAC was, it was incapable of thinking. The machine began to flash an orange light in an openly indignant fashion. “All booklovers are old fogies, but I must risk old fogy-hood and say that if these machines can think, then the fundamental difference between person and thing is pulverized,” Dr. Adler went on.




Mr. Eckert and Dr. Adler at the UNIVAC printer.

At that moment, the machine suddenly gave birth to some twenty yards of Euripides, Marx, and Darwin, which Dr. Adler tore off and, like an innocent party finding himself in possession of stolen goods, hurriedly handed on to us.

Mr. Eckert thereupon rose and, after observing that he had read a

good deal of the Encyclopaedia Britannica by the age of nine but had abandoned it in favor of engineering and invention, said he flatly disagreed with Dr. Adler. “Dr. Adler believes in magic if he believes that only man can think” he said. “Almost all the tools of communication and organization are ours to make right now. There are certain areas of the brain that we have yet to imitate. We’ll get to them shortly.”

Somewhat unnerved by this promise, or threat, we glanced down at the yardage in our lap, “Modern industry in overturning the economic foundation on which was based the traditional Family and the Family labor corresponding to it, had also unloosened all traditional Family ties,” old Karl said to us, in execrable English. 

*The person who does not read great books
has no advantage over the person who can't read them.*

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