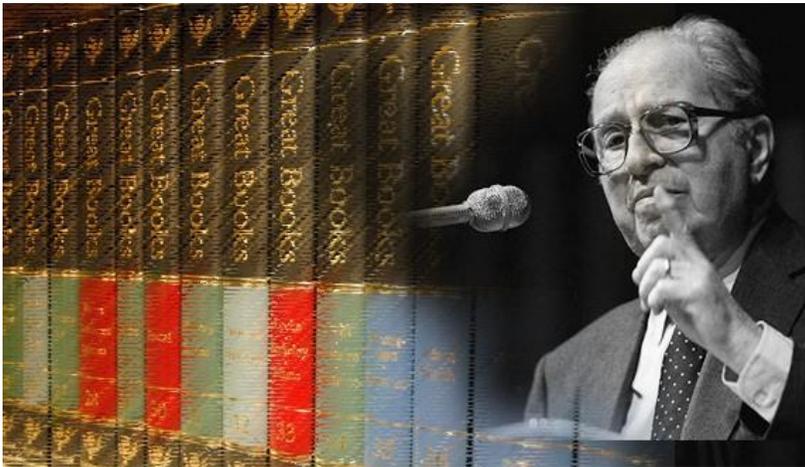


A Man of Ideas: The Legacy of Mortimer Adler

October 22, 2013 by Andrew Svenning

More than a decade after his death, Dr. Adler's work of bringing philosophy to everyone continues. Max Weismann discusses the mission of the "Philosopher at Large" and his own work at the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas.



Mortimer J. Adler passed away in June of 2001, having left an indelible mark on 20th century philosophy. A standard history of philosophy text might place him under the subheading of the Aristotelian and Thomistic revivals of his time, but his contributions extend far beyond the narrow confines one might associate with academic philosophy. He acted as the founder and director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, Chairman of the Board of Editors for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and co-founded both the Aspen Institute and the [Center for the Study of the Great Ideas](#). Adler truly was the "Philosopher at Large," the title of his 1977 intellectual autobiography, because unlike many in the discipline, he spoke to a wider audience. His interlocutors were not a close-knit circle of elite intellectuals and his published works were not technical tracts, laced in jargon accessible only to fellow professional academics. Adler was always more interested in the average person, who by nature possessed the ability to think and, therefore, to philosophize. This notion is best summed up by a phrase he came back to over and over again throughout his life: "Philosophy is everybody's business"—a proposition upon which he staked his career.

“To be a human being is to be endowed with the proclivity to philosophize,” says Max Weismann, who co-founded the Center for the Study of the Great Ideas with Adler back in 1990. “To some degree we all engage in philosophical thought in the course of our daily lives.” And what is it we all should be philosophizing about? Weismann and his mentor have a reply: “The answer, in a word, is Ideas. In two words, it is Great Ideas—the ideas basic and indispensable to understanding ourselves, our society, and the world in which we live.”

These Great Ideas form the basis for Adler’s philosophic enterprise, an enterprise his best student is now carrying on. The center operates as the resource for accessing Dr. Adler’s works, providing members with subscriptions to weekly and quarterly journals, lectures, DVDs, and an array of information on Great Books programs.

Weismann’s journey as a student of Adler began after an epiphany he had discussing Plato’s *Apology* at a Great Books seminar in 1959. “I asked the moderator who started the Great Books Foundation,” Weismann said. “Thereafter, I was in regular contact with Dr. Adler, voraciously reading all his books and the great books. I became (he said) his best student.”

The Great Books Program, an education track containing dozens titles that make up the Western Canon, is perhaps the most enduring element of Dr. Adler’s legacy. Within each of the Great Books swirls the Great Conversation—a fierce dialogue on ideas.

The origins of the program go back to John Erskine’s Honors Seminars at Columbia University in the 1920s. Adler, a high school dropout working as a copy boy at the *New York Sun*, enrolled in an extension program at Columbia, where he would eventually fall under Erskine’s influence. From 1923-1929, Adler would teach these seminars along with poet Mark Van Doren. Later, he would move to the University of Chicago, where newly appointed President Robert Hutchins was making big reforms in the school’s curriculum. Adler and Hutchins would found the Great Books of the Western World program and the Great Books Foundation, and begin the effort to bring the trove of ideas contained in these classic works to the masses. The foundation’s seminars were the venue in which Weismann would later encounter Dr. Adler’s work.

“There were three criteria,” Weismann explains of the process by which a book could be considered as part of the Great Books canon. “The first was the book’s contemporary significance—relevance to the problems and issues of the 20th century.” The Great Books and the great ideas they contain are not bound to a particular time or place, but speak to the constancy of our nature as human beings. “The second criterion was their infinite rereadability or, in the case of the more difficult mathematical and scientific works, their studiability again and again.” Adler always emphasized his status as a lifelong student and that it was one’s duty as a human being to continue learning. Truly great books are a constant resource in the ongoing process of education.

Weismann continued, “The third criterion was the relevance of the work to a very large number of great ideas and great issues that have occupied the minds of

thinking individuals for the last 25 centuries.” Each book has to be a part of the larger dialogue—the Great Conversation.

In addition to his work at the center, Weismann acts as the chairman of the [Great Books Academy](#), a homeschool program based on the Great Books curriculum. “You’ve seen ‘K-12,’ how about ‘K-PhD’—well now you have found it,” he explains.

The program, which works in cooperation with Harrison Middleton University, issues seven bachelor’s degrees, eight master’s, and two doctoral degrees, and offers students a clear track from kindergarten to post-graduate levels. With more than 3,000 students scattered across all 50 states and in many diverse countries throughout the world, the program demonstrates just how far-reaching the ideas contained within the Great Books are. “Western Civilization seems to have universal appeal as students from many religions have become Academy students—nearly all Protestant denominations, Catholics, Mormons, Jews, Muslims, Ba’hai, Buddhists, and non-believers,” Weismann says. The program makes use of the Internet to accommodate its world-wide activity. “The online Great Books Discussion classes went very well again this year,” Weismann reports. “Students and moderators have participated online from the US, UK, Canada, Poland, and Egypt.”

Adler himself took his time coming to a conclusion on the matter of religion. Over the course of his career, he became associated with the Catholic intellectual circles of his time. But despite being both a longtime member of the American Catholic Philosophical Association, and closely affiliated with the Neo-Thomistic movement—which included such luminaries as Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain—Adler wasn’t received formally into the Catholic Church until 1999. For the vast majority of his life and career as public intellectual, he viewed himself as a pagan teaching other pagans how to think about God. Thus, in 1980, he wrote *How to Think About God: A Guide for the Twentieth Century Pagan*, after a career of refining arguments for God’s existence along the lines of one of his great intellectual mentors, St. Thomas Aquinas. He remained at the time, nevertheless, the titular pagan. Weismann recounts, “Adler was born into a Jewish family. In his early 20s, he discovered St. Thomas Aquinas, and in particular the *Summa Theologica*. Many years later, he wrote that its ‘intellectual austerity, integrity, precision, and brilliance...put the study of theology highest among all of my philosophical interests.’ An enthusiastic Thomist, he was a frequent contributor to Catholic philosophical and educational journals, as well as a frequent speaker at Catholic institutions, so much so that some assumed he was a convert to Catholicism.”

Adler wouldn’t put down the mantle of pagan until 1984, when he became an Episcopalian, the denomination of his second wife, Caroline. “According to his friend Deal Hudson,” explains Weismann, “Adler ‘had been attracted to Catholicism for many years’ and ‘wanted to be a Roman Catholic, but issues like abortion and the resistance of his family and friends’ kept him away.” Adler wouldn’t take his final steps until his wife passed in 1998. Then, at the age of 97, after a long career of intellectual affinity, he would finally be baptized into the Roman Catholic Church.

The Great Books Academy includes a Catholic division, the [Angelicum Academy Homeschool Program](#). Weismann notes, “Even the encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* from Pope John Paul II on the relationship between faith and reason in essence acknowledged that philosophy is everybody’s business.” Since Mortimer Adler’s passing, his goals of bringing the Great Ideas to the masses and making philosophy our business are being carried into the 21st century by Weismann and others. “We are in our 23rd successful year of meeting those goals,” Weismann reports.



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