

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Great Books, Democracy, And Truth

(Excerpted from *Reforming Education* by Mortimer Adler in 1977 with material added in 1988)

Part 2 of 2

IV

Some basic truths are to be found in the great books, but many more errors will also be found there, because a plurality of errors is always to be found for every single truth. One way of discovering this is to detect the contradictions that can be found in the books of every great author. Being human works, they are seldom free from contradictions. Skill in reading and thinking is required to find them. But, given that skill, finding contradictions in a book puts one on the high-road in the pursuit of truth. The truth must lie on one or the other side of every contradiction. It is there for us to detect when we are able to resolve the contradiction in favor of one side or the other.

More important is the fact that the great books contradict one another on many points in the various fields of discourse in which they engage. Once again, it

must be said that the relation between truth and error is a one-many relationship: if the truth on a given point is thought to be in one or several of the great books, contradictions on that same point are likely to be found in many more great books.

In any case, it is clear that, if the great books contradict one another on many points, it must follow that many errors as well as some truths are to be found there. That is why the great books are such useful instruments in the pursuit of truth. For every truth, understanding all the errors it refutes is indispensable.

What I have just said holds particularly for the philosophical and theological works that belong in any comprehensive list of great books—the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Mill, William James. Since Bloom and his teacher, Leo Strauss, are specialists in the field of moral and political philosophy, I will draw my examples from that field of discourse.

If Aristotle's political philosophy is thought to contain a number of fundamental truths, then errors must be found in Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel. If J.S. Mill's political philosophy is thought to contain some truths not found elsewhere, then on these points errors must be found in Aristotle. If Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is thought to contain a number of basic truths in moral philosophy, then on these points serious errors must be found in Plato, Epictetus, Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

Though the same can be said for works in other branches of philosophy—metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, and the theory of knowledge—the examples I have given from the field of moral and political philosophy will suffice to enable me to distinguish between the right and wrong way to teach the great books, if the aim in using them is to teach students how to think and how to pursue the truth. Since the kind of teaching done by Leo Strauss and by his students, among them Allan Bloom, represents in my judgment the wrong way to teach the great books in our public schools and in our undergraduate colleges, let me describe the difference between what I consider to be the right and wrong way to read the great books.

The difference between Strauss' method of reading and teaching the great books and the method that Hutchins and I had adopted (the method also used by Erskine and Van Doren at Columbia, and by Barr and Buchanan at Saint John's College) lies in the distinction between a doctrinal and a dialectical approach. The doctrinal method is an attempt to read as much truth as possible (and no errors) into the work of a particular author, usually devising a special interpretation, or by discovering that special secret of an author's intentions. This method may have some merit in the graduate school where students aim to acquire narrowly specialized scholarship about a particular author. But it is the opposite of the right method to be used in conducting great books seminars in schools and colleges where the aim is learning to think and the pursuit of truth.

When in the late 1940s Leo Strauss came to the University of Chicago and we were both on the faculty teaching great books, President Hutchins suggested that I get to know him. We met several times and discussed our reading of Plato and Aristotle. I soon learned that Strauss read these great authors as if they were devoid of any serious errors, in spite of the fact that on many points they appeared to contradict one another. I also learned that for Strauss the radical changes in our social and political institutions that have occurred since antiquity had no bearing on the likelihood that Aristotle made grave errors about natural slavery and about the natural inferiority of women. In his view, these were not errors. After a few

conversations, I told Hutchins that I found talking to Strauss about philosophical books and problems thoroughly unprofitable from the point of view of leading great books seminars in the college.

The word “disciple” stresses the differences between the doctrinal and the dialectical teaching of the great books. Leo Strauss was preeminently the kind of doctrinal teacher who made disciples out of his students, disciples who followed in his footsteps and repeated again and again what they learned from him. The doctrinal teacher of disciples enables them to learn what the master thinks. The dialectical teaching of students enables them to think for themselves. I would go further and say that the doctrinal method *indoctrinates*, and only the dialectical method *teaches*.

Those of us who teach the great books dialectically exert an influence on our students, but only so far as a good use of their minds is concerned. We never make disciples of them. Strauss’ use of the doctrinal method results in students learning what the master thinks about the work under consideration. I would even go so far as to say that the doctrinal method is most appropriate in reading a sacred book. It is like the orthodox Hassidic approach to reading the Talmud. But it is totally inappropriate in liberal education at the college level or in our public schools.

V

I come now to the skepticism about moral values that prevails among college students and their teachers. I will treat this matter briefly because I have written many essays that bear on the subject. One in particular was written for Harper’s Magazine under the title “This Prewar Generation” (1940). As the title indicates, the college students of that time generally held the view that judgments about moral values were matters of subjective opinion, different for different persons, and relative to the circumstances of time and place.

Before I go on, let me say what is meant by the distinction between subjective and objective and between relative and absolute. The subjective is that which differs for you, for me, and for other individuals. The objective is that which is the same for all of us. The relative is that which varies with the circumstances of time and place. The absolute is that which is invariant always and everywhere.

In “This Prewar Generation,” I pointed out that subjectivism and relativism about value judgments on the part of students emanated from the same stance on the part of their teachers, especially their professors in philosophy and in the social sciences. At that time, the reign of philosophical positivism among Anglo-American professors gave rise to the doctrine of noncognitive ethics. This meant that moral philosophy was not knowledge, not a body of valid truths. Some went so far as to say that judgments that contained the words “ought” and “ought not” were neither true nor false. There were no prescriptive truths.

At the same time, what was known to sociologists and cultural anthropologists—that the tribal or ethnic mores differed from tribe to tribe, from culture to culture, and from time to time—led them to the dogmatic denial that there were any objectively valued moral judgments. As the positivists among the philosophers dismissed ethics as noncognitive, so the social scientists denied ethics objectivity and universality by putting the members of one tribe, culture, or ethnic

group into what they called “the ethnocentric predicament,” which meant they were unable to make objective judgments about values espoused in other tribes and cultures.

Is there any wonder that subjectivism and relativism should have been prevalent among college students exposed to such indoctrination by their professors in the 1930s and 1940s? That indoctrination has continued right down to the present. The moral skepticism among the students is the same as it was then and its cause is the same, though the vocabulary in which it is expressed may have changed in detail.

More recently I have returned to the defense of objective and absolute truth in moral philosophy by reviewing books by two eminent professors of philosophy—Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* and a book by Bernard Williams entitled *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Both books concede the dismal failure of philosophy since the seventeenth century to develop an ethics that can claim to have objective truth. Both books, the first more explicitly than the second, give Nietzsche credit for exposing the failures of modern thinkers to develop a sound moral philosophy. Both books concede that Aristotle’s *Ethics* was sound in Greek antiquity. MacIntyre, however, called for its revision to make it acceptable to us today, and Williams rejected it as no longer tenable. The critiques I wrote of these two books argued that Aristotle’s *Ethics*, without the revision proposed by MacIntyre, is just as sound in the twentieth century as it was in the fourth century B.C.

Against the background of what I have just said, I have only two points to make about the mistakes of Allan Bloom in dealing with the impoverishment of student souls in the late 1960s and continuing until the present day. If by “impoverishment” he is referring to their lack of firm dedication to objective and absolute moral truths, then that impoverishment existed as well in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. He is simply wrong as a matter of historical fact.

The other mistake made by Bloom concerns the causes that generated the result he deplores and wishes he knew how to remedy. Ascribing contemporary skepticism about moral values to the influence of Nietzsche’s nihilism is wide of the mark. The two causes were those already mentioned—philosophical positivism and the relativism of sociology and cultural anthropology. Nietzsche was not at all in the picture when these began to influence American thought; and if that has changed recently and his influence has become evident, it is still a minor cause as compared with the others that I mentioned.

VI

The great books, read and discussed with an eye out for the basic truths and the equally basic errors or mistakes to be found in them, should be a part of everyone’s general, liberal, and humanistic education. This program should begin with what might be called “junior great books” in the early grades, continued throughout basic schooling with more and more difficult books, and be pursued on an even higher level in college. It would still be everyone’s obligation to read many of these books again in the course of adult learning, for the greatest among them cannot ever be plumbed to their full depths. They are inexhaustibly rereadable for pleasure and profit.

A genuine great books program does not aim at historical knowledge of cultural antiquities or at achieving a thin veneer of cultural literacy. On the contrary, it aims only at the general enlightenment of its participants, an essential ingredient in their initial liberal education and something to be continued throughout a lifetime of learning. Its objective is to develop basic intellectual skills—the skills of critical reading, attentive listening, precise speech, and, above all, reflective thought. Through the use of these skills, the reading and seminar discussion of the great books seeks to help students pass from less to greater understanding of the basic ideas in the Western intellectual tradition and of the controversial issues with which those great ideas abound.

Let me repeat: the controlling purpose behind this recommendation is twofold. First, only through reading and discussing books that are over one's head can the skills of critical reading and reflective thought be developed. Second, of the three educational objectives acquisition of knowledge, development of intellectual skills, and increase of understanding of basic ideas and issues the third is by far the most important, and cannot be achieved without seminar discussions of truly great or almost-great books.

Finally, the earlier the reading and discussions begin and the more persistently they are continued in college and in the learning of adults, involving as it must the oft-repeated reading and discussion of the same books, the more individuals will be enabled to reach their ultimate goal in the later years of life—that of becoming generally educated human beings.

No one ever becomes a generally educated person in school, college, or university, for youth itself is an insuperable obstacle to becoming generally educated. That is why the very best thing that our educational institutions can do, so far as general education is concerned (not the training of specialists), is to afford preparation for continued learning by their students after they leave these institutions behind them. That cannot be done unless the skills of learning are cultivated in school and unless, in schools and colleges, the students are initiated into the understanding of great ideas and issues and are motivated to continue to seek an ever-increasing understanding of them.

It is necessary here to distinguish, sharply and clearly, the reading and seminar discussion of great books as a lifelong educational program from the current misuse of the phrase “great books” in connection with courses in Western civilization that college students are required to take as part of a core curriculum.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, there were no great books of Western civilization that were not of European origin. Until the nineteenth century, all were written by white males. Hence if one were to read all or almost all of the great books of Western civilization, most of them would, perforce, be written by white, male Europeans.

It is certainly arguable that under the radically changed circumstances of the twentieth century, college students should be required to study global civilization, both Eastern and Western, not just Western or European. It is also arguable that many books written in this or the last century, books which are clearly not great, should be studied for their relevance to the most pressing problems of our age. But all such arguments have nothing whatsoever to do with the educational program associated with a list of great Western books, most of which were written by white European males.

The educational purpose of the great books program is not to study Western civilization. Its aim is not to acquire knowledge of historical facts. It is rather to understand the great ideas. Its objective is not to become acquainted with the variety of conflicting cultures and groups that engender the problems that confront us in the contemporary world. Its controlling purposes, as I have already pointed out, are solely to learn how to read critically and to think reflectively about basic ideas and issues, not just in school and college but throughout one's life.

For that purpose, the minimum list of great books to be read would include at least the works of 60 authors. A more intensive program would extend that number to 125. At the college level, the minimal program should include seminars once a week for two years; at the maximum, it should include two seminars a week for four years. At the level of basic schooling, it would involve seminars once a week for at least nine years—from grade three to grade twelve.

I mention these numbers lest it be thought that a required single semester or a one-year college course in the history of civilization, Western or global, with twelve or fifteen traditionally recognized Western classics in the list of required readings, is even, in small part, a great books program. Such survey courses are mainly history courses, conducted primarily by lectures. They may be supplemented by small group discussions that only faintly resemble great books seminars.

To recapitulate: A true great books program is not a course in the history of Western civilization, nor is it devoted to the scholarly study of the books read. It is concerned primarily with the discussion of the great ideas and issues to be found in those books. It may, therefore, be asked why the works read should consist entirely of works written by Westerners, both European and American, and not by authors who belong to one of the four or five major cultural traditions of the Far East.

The answer is simply that the basic ideas and issues of our *one* Western intellectual tradition are *not* the basic ideas and issues in the *four* or *five* intellectual traditions of the Far East. In the distant future there may be a single, worldwide cultural community with one set of common basic ideas and issues; but until that comes into existence, becoming a generally educated human being in the West involves understanding the basic ideas and issues that abound in the intellectual tradition to which one is heir either by the place of one's birth or by immigration to the West.



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