THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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# GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

BY
MORTIMER J. ADLER

With an Introduction by
WILLIAM BENTON

## *Introduction*

**William Benton**
**1900-1973**

OURS IS THE AGE OF THE PAT ANSWER. The reason is not hard to come by. The tempo of contemporary life leaves us little time to think about abstract questions. So we fall gladly into the arms of the Answer Man, who awaits us everywhere—in our personal and domestic lives, in our community and political activities, and even in international affairs.

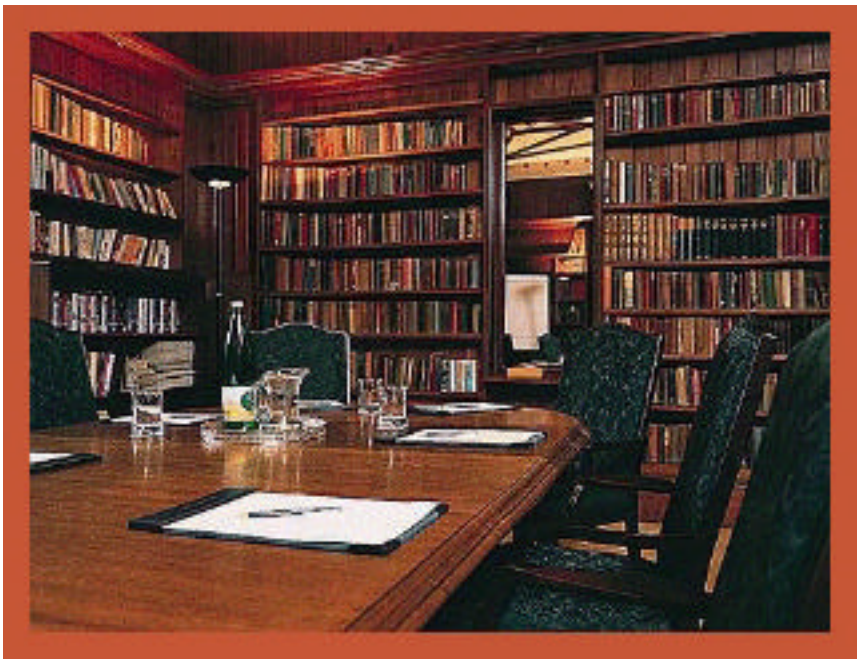
We Americans esteem as precious the right to think for ourselves. But as the world becomes more complex we permit more and more of our thinking to be done for us by alleged experts.

Mortimer Adler is an anti-expert. He is persuaded that freedom cannot withstand the free man's willingness to surrender his problems to somebody else. Every man is born to be free, and the free man should make his own decisions. Faith in reason—and faith in reasoning—becomes identical with faith in democracy. In a democracy, you and you and you must be the Answer Man. I welcome publication of these columns as a lively contribution to man's endless effort to understand the world and himself.

Mortimer Adler has one of the most orderly, compendious, and yet adventurous minds I have ever encountered. And he is persuasive. He has persuaded some of the most influential men in America to take time out to think.

Let me tell you about one episode I was in.

In 1943 the great books movement led by Chancellor Robert M. Hutchins of the University of Chicago and by Adler was beginning to attract national attention. The Honors Course at the University of Chicago and the curriculum of St. John's College in Annapolis were widely discussed. These were based on the great books. Among adults Adler's *How to Read a Book* had become a best seller. With several top Chicago business and professional men, I participated in a great books reading-and-discussion group—the famous "Fat Men's Class"—with Hutchins and Adler at the head of the table. This was in the midst of a world war, and forty of Americas busiest men were involved!



We forty learned—or, more accurately, relearned—that the central problems of life are always the same, whether in modern America or in ancient Rome. They are the problems of Man—good and evil, love and hate, war and peace, happiness and duty, liberty and security. They are the same whether we humans meet them in an oxcart, a chariot, or a tomato-colored convertible. These are the problems the authors of the great books tackled—in science, history, philosophy, and literature. Theirs is the "great conversation" of the ages, which never ends. The "Fat Men's Class" became the model for similar groups of business, political, and trade-union leaders around the country. And this class and its many lineal descendants still roll on. Seventeen years later the Great Books Foundation, sponsoring groups in libraries, schools, clubs, shops, and factories, is one of the largest adult-education enterprises in America.

But in 1943 some of the greatest books were impossible to get in a good edition. Others were unavailable in any edition. And still others had never been translated into English. I suggested to Dr. Hutchins the possibility of publishing a definitive set of the great books. On one point there was instant agreement: if it were to be done at all, it should be, done right, and "right" meant a set of books not just for our time but for decades to come. The whole of Western man's accepted wisdom—from Homer and Augustine to Darwin and Freud—had to be comprehended. Out of our discussion came the decision, in 1944, that Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., which I serve as publisher and chairman, would undertake the enterprise.

Eight years later came Britannica's 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World.* The publication was a literary triumph. "A noble monument to the human mind," said Gilbert Highet in *The New York Times.* "An intellectual enterprise which has no parallel in the history of Western man," said Mark Van Doren in the *Herald Tribune.* The seven feet of volumes included 443 works of 74 authors. As Editor, Hutchins had presided over the group of scholars and laymen who had made the selection. As Associate Editor, Adler had occupied himself with something vaguely known to the rest of us as "the index."

Of the two million dollars and eight years spent in producing *Great Books of the Western World,* almost half the money—and much more than half the time—was taken by Adler in the preparation of this index, now called the *Syntopicon,* which constitutes two thick volumes of the 54 volume set. Adler and his editors divided

all thought into 102 basic ideas—ranging from Angel to World—and broke these ideas down into 2,987 topics containing 163,000 exact references to passages in *Great Books of the Western World.* The Syntopicon also included an inventory of Terms, a Bibliography of Additional Readings, and, most importantly, essays by Adler himself on the history of each of the 102 great ideas. The essays alone total more than a thousand pages.

Five hundred Founding Subscribers paid five hundred dollars for each set of the first edition. We celebrated the launching at a banquet in New York addressed by Dr. Hutchins, Dr. Adler, Clifton Fadiman, and myself. Then the Old Dominion Foundation gave 1,600 sets to selected public libraries across the country. *Great Books of the Western World* was in business.

After our first printings, we had an invaluable asset: the plates of the books. We planned a handsomely styled and bound edition priced within the reach of the general public. Our gamble has proved successful. Americans do want the best books in their homes. Americans do want their children to grow up in the company of great literature, great philosophy, great science. Sales increased from 3,300 sets in 1956 to more than 40,000 in 1960, and they continue to rise at an accelerating pace.

Marshall Field, Jr., publisher of the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the *Chicago Daily News* and a member of the "Fat Men's Class" decided on the next gamble: a weekly column to be distributed by his newspaper syndicate in which Adler would choose a question submitted by a reader and reply to it not with the pat answer, but with an analysis of the greatest thinking about it. The sole objective was to present the problem—not the solution—to the intelligent reader in terms set forth by the leading minds of all time. Within a year twenty-eight newspapers (including the *Tokyo Kenkyu Sha*) were carrying the column, a remarkable figure for such a feature. And the number increases.

Mounting requests for a collection of selected columns—one of them from the Librarian of San Quentin Prison—led to the publication of this book.

Here in Mortimer Adler's columns is testimony that the contemporary American cares profoundly about his life and his society—and about the light that the living tradition of thirty centuries of thought can throw upon issues that confront him today. It has been said, "Great books are the books that never have to be written

again." But the Great Ideas they explore are the birthright of every man and woman of every age. They must be constantly examined and re-examined.

The success of Mortimer Adler's column suggests that a new surge of learning is developing in America. I am happy to commend him and to commend his "Great Ideas from the Great Books" columns to you.

WILLIAM BENTON

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# *Preface*

This is a book of questions and answers. The questions, coming as they do from newspaper readers all over the country, demonstrate a widespread interest in the great ideas. More specifically, they express the desire of our fellow-citizens to learn what the wisdom of the past can teach us about the problems we all face in the twentieth century. They do not ask for the solution of these problems—for the one right answer—but only for the clarification and illumination of these problems which can be drawn from the great writers in our Western tradition—the authors of the books that have contributed most to the development of our culture.

Accordingly, in answering the letters that are collected in this book I have tried for the most part to summarize the insights and wisdom which can be found in the great books. In many cases, it has been necessary to report conflicting theories of the matter under consideration, for on the important questions with which we are here concerned the great minds of the past are seldom of one opinion. But where they differ, they also help us to think more deeply about the problem at hand. They present us with the basic alternatives that we must consider in order to make an Intelligent decision as to where we ourselves stand on the issue.

In some instances, I have deviated from the general policy of letting the authors of the great books answer the questions. I have taken the liberty of expressing my own opinion either on the question raised or on the conflicting answers that the authors of the great books have given to it. I have also occasionally referred to

other writers, particularly contemporary ones, when they contribute to our understanding of the problem. But for the most part this book runs true to its title. It consists of great ideas from the great books on a wide variety of matters of current interest.

In view of this, a word of explanation is probably in order concerning both the great books and the great ideas.

Since 1920, when John Erskine started the great books course at Columbia University, there have been a number of different lists of the authors whose writings are an indispensable part of everyone's liberal education—in school and after. All these lists—the Columbia list, the one Dr. Hutchins and I followed at the University of Chicago, the one used at St. John's College in Annapolis, the one constructed by The Great Books Foundation for its adult seminars—are in substantial agreement. That large area of agreement was the basis of the selection we made when Encyclopaedia Britannica undertook to publish in 54 volumes an authoritative edition of the great books. The 74 authors included in that set, *Great Books of the Western World*, constitute, in my judgment, the best list of the "greats" that has ever been drawn up.

The questions raised and answered in this book touch on a great many but not on all of these ideas. From the weekly mailbag of letters that pose questions for me to answer, I have tried to select questions which deal with matters of widest interest. I judge this in terms of the frequency with which a particular question is raised.

Each of the 107 chapters of this book begins with a letter that represents a kind of composite picture of a large number of similar letters that I received. In style and tone, as well as in content, it epitomizes a whole batch of letters on a particular subject.

The letters fall into a number of groups according to the general character of the subjects with which they deal. It is for this reason that the book is divided into ten parts. Each Part relates to some main field of interest which can be roughly defined by a particular constellation of great ideas. To enable the reader to get some sense of this, I am going to list below the great ideas that are relevant to each of the ten parts into which this book is divided:

*PART I* *Questions About Philosophy, Science and Religion*
*PART II* *Questions About Politics: Man and the State*
*PART III* *Questions About Moral Problems*
*PART IV* *Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books*
*PART V* *Questions About Theology and Metaphysics*

*PART VI* *Questions About Social Problems*
*PART VII* *Questions About Economic Institutions*
*PART VIII* *Questions About Art and Beauty*
*PART IX* *Questions About Love and Friendship*
*PART X* *Questions About Man and His World*

The reader who is especially interested in the problems dealt with in a particular group of questions and answers can pursue the matter further in a number of ways. (1) He can go to the Syntopicon and read the essays on the great ideas that are enumerated above as relevant to that particular field. (2) He can read some of the great books and other words listed in the recommended readings. (3) He may even wish to persuade some of his friends or members of his family to undertake such a course of reading and then, in the light of the reading done, they can engage in a discussion of the problems involved.

In launching this book as another venture in the liberal education of adults, I wish to thank all the men and women, young and old, who have shown their interest in the great ideas and the great books by writing the good letters which, from week to week, I have answered in newspapers across this country and in Canada. I also wish to thank Mr. Seymour Cain and Mrs. John Ryan for all the help they have given me in the handling of the letters, in the consideration of the answers, and in the preparation of this new revised and enlarged edition, which has been issued in response to the increasing interest in my syndicated column.

MORTIMER J. ADLER

*San Francisco, January 15, 1963*

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

This book is one of the most sought after and hard to find of all Dr. Adler's out-of-print books. In that regard, we are in the process of scanning it to make it readily available to you.

**NOTE**: ***It is about a third done, but we could use a volunteer to help [we would provide the book].***

Following is the first of the 107 letters:

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# 1. WHAT IS TRUTH?

*Dear Dr. Adler,*

*I find it hard to define what truth is. Some of my friends say that truth is what most people think is so. But that does not make sense to me, because sometimes the majority is wrong. Even what everyone thinks is so may not be the truth. There must be some better definition of truth. What is it?*

*A. N.*

*Dear A. N.,*

You are quite right to feel dissatisfied. Your friends did not arrive at a definition of truth, but at one of the signs of truth. In certain cases the fact that the majority holds something to be true is an indication that it is *probably* true. But this is only one of the signs of truth, and by no means the best one. And it does not answer your question or Pilate's— "What is truth?"

It may help you to understand the nature of truth to consider what is involved in telling a lie. If a man tells a woman "I love you" when he does not, he is telling a lie. When a child who has raided the cookie jar tells his mother "I didn't," he is lying. Lying consists in saying the opposite of what you know, think, or feel. It is distinct from honest error, such as that of the umpire who calls a man "out" when he is "safe," or vice versa.

Josiah Royce, a great American philosopher at the beginning of this century, defined a liar as a man who willfully misplaces his ontological predicates; that is, a man who says "is" when he means "is not," or "is not" when he means "is." Royce's definition of a liar leads us quickly to the most famous of all philosophical definitions of truth. It was given by Plato and Aristotle almost twenty-five centuries ago; it has been repeated in various ways ever since, and seldom been improved upon.

Plato and Aristotle say that the opinions we hold are true when they assert that that which is, is, or that that which is not, is not; and that our opinions are false when they assert that that which is, *is not*, or that that which is not, *is*.

When the "is" in a statement we make agrees with the way things are, then our statement is true, and its truth consists in its corresponding to the existent facts of nature and reality. When we

think that something exists or has happened which does not exist or did not happen, then we are mistaken and what we think is false.

So, as you see, truth is very easy to define, and the definition is not very hard to understand. Perhaps impatient Pilate would have waited for the answer if he had known that it could be given so briefly. But maybe he was thinking of another question, "How can we tell whether a statement is true or false?" This, by the way, is the question you and your friends ended up by answering.

To this question there are three main types of answer. The first insists that some statements are self-evidently true, such as, "The whole is greater than the part." Such statements reveal their truth to us directly by the fact that we find it impossible to think the opposite of them. When we understand what a whole is and what a part is, we *cannot* think that a part is greater than the whole to which it belongs. That is how we know immediately the truth of the statement that the whole is greater than any of its parts.

Another type of answer says that the truth of statements can be tested by our experience or observations. If a man says that it did not rain in Chicago a single day last month, we can check the truth of his statement by looking up the official weather records. Or we can stick a foot into a swimming pool to see if the water is as warm as a friend says it is. Similarly, a scientific generalization is considered true only as long as no contrary facts are observed.

The third type of answer has to do with statements that are neither self-evidently true nor capable of being checked by direct appeal to observed facts. It may be a question of a person's character, what type of product is most desirable for certain purposes, or whether the favorite will win the next race. Here it is permissible to count noses and to find the consensus of a group of people or of the experts. That an opinion is held by a majority can be taken as a sign that it has some probability of being true.

This third answer was the one your friend arrived at. But the fact that it expressed the consensus of the group does not make it the right answer to the question, "What is truth?" Nor does it give the full answer to the question, "How can we tell whether a statement is true?"

Defining truth is easy; knowing whether a particular statement is true is much harder; and pursuing the truth is most difficult of all. 🕮

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Edwin Goff**

**Visnu Murti, Belgium**

**Brooks Smith**

**Edward Strong**

**David Uribe, Student**

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