THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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FIFTY YEARS AGO

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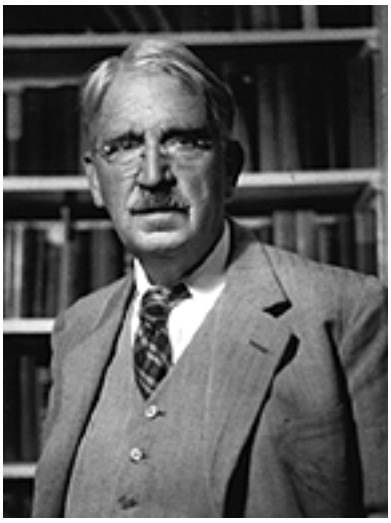
Fusilier

(See Cover)

Two Latin teachers* recently agreed that the event which would give them most pleasure and at the same time mightily advance the cause of true education would be to blow up Teachers College at Columbia University. Mortimer Jerome Adler would probably volunteer to light the fuse.

Lighting educational fuses is his specialty. He started as an undergraduate at Columbia over 30 years ago. Professor John Dewey, then the Jove of Morningside Heights, once came to a meeting of the university philosophy club to hear one of his students read a paper. As the thin, intense young man warmed to his subject, the great philosopher's face grew red. Finally, when young Adler quoted a passage from Dewey and commented, "There is certainly nothing of the love of God in this utterance," Dewey could take no more. He jumped to his feet, shouting, "Nobody is going to tell *me* how to love God," and stalked out.



John Dewey
More dangerous than Hitler?

In class Mortimer Adler harassed the eminent professor by sending him long, learned letters pointing out how his lectures contradicted his earlier lectures. For a time, Pragmatist Dewey read the letters in class, but eventually he called Adler to his office and suggested he lay off. Adler did not lay off. He continued to take intellectual pot-shots at Dewey and his disciples.

Socrates with Dry Martini. This target practice has won him a unique position in U.S. education. He is not an educator in the usual sense: he never drafted a college catalogue or worried about a football team. He writes too well, and has made too much money writing, to be accepted by scholars as one of themselves.

* There still are a few.

He has been denounced as a charlatan, a sensation-seeker, a medieval reactionary, a would-be agent of the Inquisition. He has developed an unequaled gift for making enemies and influencing people. He has spoken rudely of such sacrosanct characters as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ("It is time that [his] pedestal were dismounted") and Bertrand Russell ("He made a fool of himself"). He has spoken ill of children ("the most imperfect of all human beings") and dogs ("they are only brutes"). He has dared to say, several times and in public, that Darwin was wrong. He has committed the modern heresy of declaring that there are such permanent, absolute values as Truth and Justice. Like a Socratic traveling salesman, he has moved up and down the country, talking to the young and causing acute attacks of thought in thousands of college students who scarcely ever thought of thinking before. The majority of U.S. college professors would gladly hand him the bitter chalice; he merely enjoys the situation and sticks to dry Martinis with lemon peel.

He is all over the map. Truer to his dictum that the philosopher belongs in the market place, he has at various times popped up in such non-academic roles as adviser to the [Hollywood] Hays Office, indoctrination lecturer for the U.S. Air Transport Command, merchandising consultant to Bamberger's of New Jersey (he developed a theory that new electric toasters and bobby pins evolve like new biological species, which in some quarters earned him the nickname "Drygoods Darwin").

At present on leave from his post as professor of the philosophy of law at the University of Chicago, he 1) is consultant to Paul Hoffman and his staff of the Ford Foundation; 2) conducts summer seminars at Aspen, Tycoon Walter Paepcke's Athens-in-Colorado, on matters like Freedom and God; 3) leads the "Fat Boys" Great Books class at Chicago, including such notable converts to culture as Meyer Kestnbaum of Hart Schaffner & Marx, Harold Swift of Swift & Co.; 4) sells the Great Books idea, relentlessly and with success (the Great Books Foundation now has 2,000 groups).

Adler's most notable achievement will be unveiled next month at a black-tie dinner in Manhattan's Waldorf-Astoria, when Encyclopaedia Britannica will solemnly present to 500 leading U.S. citizens (each of whom paid $500 for it) the long-heralded set of the *Great Books of the Western World*: edited by Hutchins and Adler. The set is unquestionably the biggest culture buy anywhere: 54

volumes, 32,000 pages, 25 million words, 5 ft. 1 in. on the bookshelf, 443 great works by 74 authors.*

Its most arresting feature was contributed by Mortimer Adler in his two volume index called Syntopicon, † referring the reader to everything of note the great authors have said about the Great Ideas of Western Civilization. There are, by Adler's count, exactly 102 Great Ideas. A lesser man might have quailed before the problem of making such a reckoning. Not Adler.

Education Rocket? "The philosopher," he once remarked, "ought never to try to avoid the duty of making up his mind." Adler has made up his mind—probably one of the best minds at large today—on any number of vital issues. Americans expect no more help from philosophers in practical affairs than from poets, and rather less than from astrologers. Adler believes, however, that the question of right and wrong is practical, and that it is the philosopher's job to help answer it. Adler furthermore holds that plain men and women can and should be philosophers. Says he: "Philosophy is everybody's business."

In one way, Americans have begun to see what he means: there were philosophies behind Adolf Hitler, Alger Hiss and the Chinese Red army in Korea. But they still fail to realize that professional philosophers, like Pragmatist John Dewey, have deeply influenced the lives of millions of Americans who could not tell a pragmatist from a Holy Roller.

* Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Thucyclides, Plato, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, Euclid, Archimedes. Apollonius, Nicomachus, Lucretius, Epictetus, Alarcus Aurelius, Virgil, Plutarch, Tacitus. Ptolemy, Copernicus, Kepler, Plotinus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Chaucer, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rabelais, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Gilbert, Galileo, Harvey, Cervantes, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Milton, Pascal, Newton, Huygens, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Swift, Sterne, Fielding, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Adam Smith, Gibbon, Kant, *The Federalist* (by Hamilton, Madison and Jay), J. S. Boswell, Lavoisier, Fourier, Faraday, Hegel, Goethe, Melville, Darwin, Marx, Engels, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, William James, Freud. Most controversial omissions: Luther, Calvin, Moliere, Voltaire, Dickens, Balzac, Einstein.

† New coinage meaning "collection of topics."

102 GREAT IDEAS

Angel	Honor	Poetry
Animal	Hypothesis	Principle
Aristocracy	Idea	Progress
Art	Immortality	Prophecy
Astronomy	Induction	Prudence
Beauty	Infinity	Punishment
Being	Judgment	Quality
Cause	Justice	Quantity
Chance	Knowledge	Reasoning
Change	Labor	Relation
Citizen	Language	Religion
Constitution	Law	Revolution
Courage	Liberty	Rhetoric
Custom & Convention	Life & Death	Same & Other
Definition	Logic	Science
Democracy	Love	Sense
Desire	Man	Sign & Symbol
Dialectic	Mathematics	Sin
Duty	Matter	Slavery
Education	Mechanics	Soul
Element	Medicine	Space
Emotion	Memory & Imagination	State
Eternity	Metaphysics	Temperance
Evolution	Mind	Theology
Experience	Monarchy	Time
Family	Nature	Truth
Fate	Necessity & Contingency	Tyranny
Form	Oligarchy	Universal & Particular
God	One & Many	Virtue & Vice
Good & Evil	Opinion	War & Peace
Government	Opposition	Wealth
Habit	Philosophy	Will
Happiness	Physics	Wisdom
History	Pleasure & Pain	World

Why 102? Editor Adler admits that this figure might have been 120 or 97.

How Does It Work? If a reader is interested in one of the 102 Big Ideas, *e.g.,* Good & Evil, he merely turns to the chapter so headed. There he finds a nine-page introduction by Editor Adler, logical sub-topics, *e.g.,* the general theory of good & evil, the moral theory of the good, etc. Under these sub-topics he finds references to 3,306 passages in 60 of the great authors and the Bible.

What if the reader is interested in a potion not included in the Big Ideas, *e.g.,* Sex? He can then turn to an inventory of 1,792 terms which will tell him under which of the Great Ideas sex is treated, *i.e.,* Animal, Desire, Evolution, Love, Man.

What Is It Good For? Says Adler: 1) to enable plain readers to read about topics they are interested in; 2) to save students and scholars "unnecessary drudgery before thinking is begun"; 3) to show people that thinkers of the past have things to say to the present. Will it make people's minds lazy? Not at all, says Adler. "It is the exact reverse of the giant comptometers which are fed data and do the thinking for people; the Syntopicon feeds people the data-the issues and the various positions taken on them—and lets the human mind do its own thinking."

The pragmatists created an intellectual universe without fixed truth, where right and wrong swirl through time and space, always dependent on local interpretation and individual desire. To a pragmatist, "ideals" are merely hypotheses, to be forever tested by individual experience and subject to change without notice.

Adler revolted against this universe. He reasserted the old-fashioned belief that ideals like freedom and democracy are not mere regional preferences, but demonstrably good; that man has will and reason with which to distinguish between good and evil. He felt that organized U.S. education, dominated by the pragmatists, was "one of the largest rackets in this country," turning out students "chaotically informed and viciously indoctrinated with the local prejudices of professors and their textbooks." Most U.S. college graduates, says Adler, can neither read, write nor think properly. They are not being taught how to lead a good life (the aim of all liberal education), but merely how to make a good living. Education merely for specific jobs, cries Adler, "is the training of slaves."

What to do about it? Adler, Hutchins and a band of dedicated fellow guerrillas—notably Stringfellow Barr, former president of St. John's College, Scott Buchanan, former dean of St. John's, and Mark Van Doren, English professor at Columbia have answered long and loud: make U.S. education truly liberal. That means, according to Adler, that 1) American college professors must commit academic hara-kiri by giving up their specialized fields; they should be able to teach anything in the liberal arts; 2) the scientific method should stick to science, and leave to philosophy the job of determining matters of right and wrong; 3) all Americans should get the same kind of liberal education till they take their A.B. (from two to four years earlier than at present) and specialize later.

Whether such a program can be put into practice in 20th century America is a question. In the U.S. of the 18th century, liberal education was the privilege of the few. But when all U.S. men and women got the vote, and unprecedented amounts of wealth and leisure, the situation was changed. The problem at the heart of the educational controversy which has been raging for half a century in the U.S. is simply: how to educate the freed citizen for a free life.

Tide Turning? The first U.S. answer, helped along by John Dewey, was free colleges and the elective system, with heavy emphasis on "useful" subjects like science. Most U.S. educators today agree that the elective system leads generally to an aimless nibbling at knowledge, or to excessive specialization. But there is bitter disagreement as to what should be done. Most Deweyites insist that 20th century students must combine the liberal arts with "useful" studies, and that the learning of the past must be "recon-

structed" to fit present needs. Adler feels that this view has led to totally inadequate half measures, i.e., digested "survey" courses in the humanities. But there are signs that the great battle—variously expressed as Humanists v. Pragmatists, Thomists v. Positivists,* Adler v. the rest of U.S. education—is slowly beginning to turn.

The ground swell is strong and deep: Adler, Hutchins & Co. are only part of it. The atom bomb, more than anything else, showed the U.S. that (in Adler's words) "the more science we have the more we are in need of wisdom to prevent its misuse." Reinhold Niebuhr expressed a growing uneasiness in the U.S. conscience over confused and slipshod morality. Arnold Toynbee found wide response when he attacked the easy optimism which regards history as an endless escalator to progress rather than a continuing struggle between good and evil. The Harvard report on U.S. education (TIME, Aug. 13, 1945) signaled a serious drive in more and more U.S. universities for a unified core of knowledge. More and more educators are realizing the need for 1) greater order, without which freedom is impossible; 2) more attention to moral questions or—as one of them puts it—know-why rather than know-how. Harvard's James Bryant Conant has pointed out the need for the "expert on judging experts." Said Princeton's Dean J. Douglas Brown last week: "The students want to know the values we are protecting, not technical devices." Reported A. A. Suppan, philosophy professor at Wisconsin State Teachers College in Milwaukee, after a round table on the subject: "Many of the students say, 'We need some certainty.' They point out that the Dewey criterion for good—Will it work?'—can be a measuring stick for totalitarians too.'"

The Little Bookie. Mortimer Adler started strangling the snake of positivism almost in his cradle. He grew up in a quiet, middle-class neighborhood in uptown Manhattan (his father was a jewelry salesman, his mother an ex-school teacher). He often told his playmates: "Go away. I'm thinking," and shut the door of his room on them.

* Positivists are the philosophical school, virtually dominant in the U.S. and Britain today, which suggests that philosophy is merely a tool for the logical analysis of limited propositions. Adler hates the positivists' guts, and they his.

He was a prolific writer (to get one short story published, he mimeographed his own newspaper, which lasted for two issues). He thought he might become a poet. Sample effort: "Girls are funny creatures / Though some have pretty features / And with their whims and ways / They can put boys in a daze." But his real passion was learning. Says he: "It never occurred to me not to get A's." Once he almost ran away from home when he got a B.

He started to collect a library when still in grade school, and with fanatic neatness insisted that the books must always be kept in exact order. His first pupil was his younger sister Carolyn. The first lesson was an early Adlerian version of evolution. Mortimer declared: "You ought to know the facts of life. First there are fish, then come monkeys, and then little girls. Mother will tell you the rest."

Later, Adler sent her long, peremptory reading lists ("Go to some library and get John Morley's essay, 'On Compromise.' Don't put this off. Get it somehow. Buy it in a bookstore if necessary. I'll go halve-with you . . . which reminds me that you ought to read the New Testament this summer . . .").

After two years in high school ("I had a difference of opinion with the principal about who was running the school") he got a job as a copy boy on the Sun, and broke into print writing editorials at $7 a column. One day he read in John Stuart Mill's autobiography that the great Englishman had read Plato before he was ten. Not having read Plato at 15 made Adler "feel like a savage." Then and there he drew a pay advance and bought Plato's Republic. Immediately afterwards he decided 1) to go to college, 2) to become a philosopher.

Fateful Footnote. At Columbia he studied furiously. Saturdays, before the library closed, he would take out a stack of books and tote them home; he knew he could not possibly read them all, but he wanted at least to look at them and read the table of contents. He took John Erskine's General Honors Course, the first "great books" course in the U.S. (it was never known by that name).

Soon he was himself teaching the Honors course.* He also got a job as a psychology instructor (his feud with Professor Dewey kept him out of the philosophy department), and launched vigorously into experiments. When he was trying to measure fear, he

calmly dropped a four-foot live boa constrictor on to people's shoulders. "Boy," he recalls happily, "would their pupils dilate!"

His love was still philosophy. One day be discovered St. Thomas, and one by one, as he managed to save the money, young Adler bought the 21 volumes of the *Summa Theologica.*

In 1927, Adler married pretty Helen Boynton, daughter of an Illinois manufacturer. To support her in a style he considered adequate, Adler held down not only his two teaching jobs at Columbia, but taught psychology at C.C.N.Y., lectured at the People's Institute and gave a Great Books course in the basement of a church. His total income (pasha-like for that day): $11,000. Far too busy to work for his Ph.D., he hired students at $1 an hour to do research, and whipped out his thesis on musical appreciation in 24 hours. He got his Ph.D., all right, but never his A.B. That degree was withheld because he would not take the swimming test ("I refuse to take my clothes off in the middle of the day").

Robert M. Hutchins

Then destiny struck, in a footnote on the law of evidence which Adler wrote into his first book. A bright young man named Robert Maynard Hutchins, then acting dean of the Yale Law School, saw the footnote and asked Adler to come up to see him. Adler, who really knew nothing about the subject, studied the law of evidence night and day for two weeks. Then he went to New Haven, in his best black suit. The dean, aged 28, received him in tennis ducks. They instantly impressed each other as great men. When Hutchins became president of the University of Chicago, he took Adler along. Thereupon, the academic battle of the century began.

Also a Purple Tie. Adler was rapidly developing his ideas on education, and Hutchins enthusiastically egged him on.

If Adler could have had his way, he would have abolished textbooks, lectures, grades, electives, possibly professors.

* Students in his first class: Clifton Fadiman, Lionel Trilling, Whittaker Chambers.

When Hutchins and Adler tried to put some of these ideas into practice, the fur flew. The philosophy department threatened mass resignation rather than let Adler stay; Hutchins had to create a new post for him—professor of the philosophy of law. An air of civil war overran the Midway. One goaded professor once denied that two and two make four, merely because a pro-Adler student said they did. Even Adler's clothes provoked his colleagues — justifiably: he sometimes sported a lavender shirt and purple tie.

To many students, he became a hero. Recalls one: "He'd never let go a point until a protagonist or antagonist understood it. He would ask questions, leading you step by step through your answers, to the rational conclusion. If that failed, he'd dash to the blackboard and draw a diagram. If the student fought on, he might say: 'I'll take this home and see if I can find an error in my logic.' I've seen him come back and admit he was wrong. In Adler's world, there is truth in every situation, and he insisted that his students stay on the track trying to find it."

Flood for Babel. Faced with Adler's passion for logic, a lot of people began to feel like Gertrude Stein who, shortly after meeting him, hit him on the head several times with her fist and declared: "Adler, you are obviously the kind of young man that's used to winning arguments. I won't argue with you any more."

Adler has an almost naive conviction that if he can show people in open, logical argument that he is right, they will be convinced and not take offense. In *Crime, Law and Social Science,* he showed the social scientists why they were not scientific. In *What Man Has Made of Man,* he showed the psychoanalysts what was wrong with psychoanalysis. In several writings he explained what was wrong with St. Thomas (among other things, Adler felt, the angelic doctor had failed to prove the existence of God). Though he had written learnedly and reverently of Aquinas, Adler was now snubbed by most Thomists. Caustic colleagues nicknamed him a "peeping Thomist."

Saint Thomas Aquinas

In *How to Read a Book,* Adler showed Americans that they could not even read intelligently, and brilliantly told them what to do about it. (The book, which he wrote because he needed $1,000 to pay the rent of his expensive apartment, became a bestseller, and earned him $60,000.)

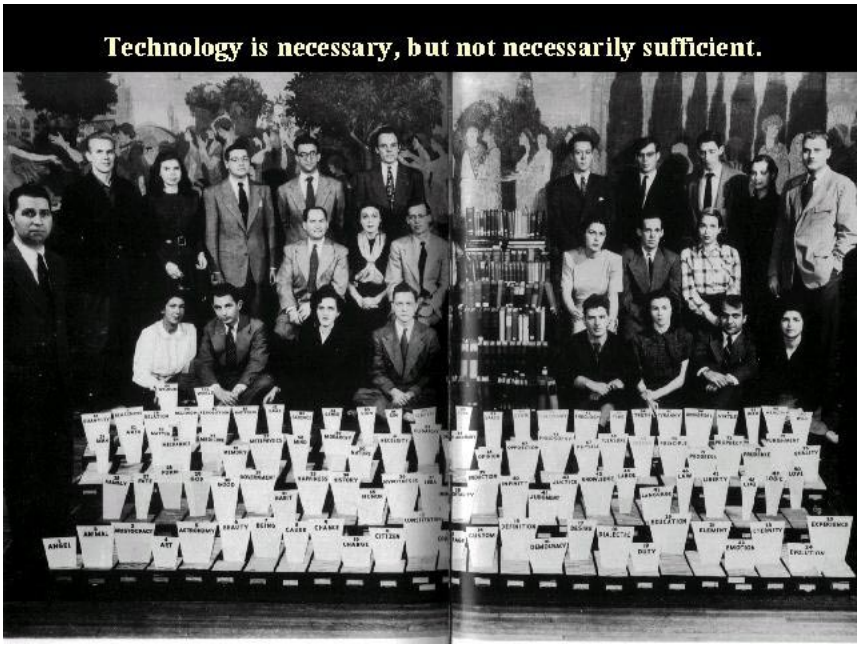
In 1940, with the U.S. on the edge of war, Adler gave the whole U.S. academic profession a tongue-lashing which it never forgot or forgave. Speaking at an open air meeting of eminent scientists, philosophers and theologians in New York, Adler declared that the dominant doctrine in the U.S. was "the affirmation of science and the denial of philosophy and religion." The professors were hypocrites in paying lip service to religion: "They give true-false tests, but never take them . . . Religion is either the supreme human discipline, because it is God's discipline of man . . . or it has no place at all . . . [The professors] dishonor themselves as well as religion by tolerating it when . . . they really think that faith is superstition." Most U.S. professors, he said, are positivists. They haven't the guts to make up their minds about what is right and wrong" [They] might be obliged to risk [their] academic reputation . . . Democracy has much more to fear from the mentality of its teachers than from Hitler ..."

Just as he thundered: "The Tower of Babel we are building invites another flood," the canopy over their heads burst open and a flood of accumulated rainwater came down on the audience.

Toward war's end, Adler become strangely quiet: he had, in fact, withdrawn from the battlefield to tackle the enormous job of the *Syntopicon*.

Deadline for God. When William Benton (who had just become head of the Encyclopaedia Britannica) decided in 1943 to publish a set of the Great Books, he wanted a gimmick that would induce the reader actually to lift the books off the shelf. Adler suggested an

index which would guide people to any topic they were interested in. The index was supposed to cost $60,000 and take two years to produce. Before Adler was through, it took nearly $1,000,000 and eight years.



Adler and Syntopicon Staff

He started with a handful of helpers in two cellar offices, and a list of 4,000 ideas that bad to be boiled down to manageable size. Adler spent months just throwing away ideas, deciding which rated a separate pigeonhole of its own and which could be slipped in with some other idea. When, after nearly three years, the list was finally pared down, the staff assembled in Index House, a rambling greystone house on the Midway. They were to read through the 443 great books—plus the Bible, which is not included in the set but which Adler decided to index—and to find references to each of the Big Ideas on Adler's list and their 3,000 topics. The staff (50 indexers at the peak of the work, plus 75 clerical workers) worked through all the books four times. At first, they were assigned six ideas a week. Later Adler stepped up the tempo to seven. Deadlines were strict and proclaimed by grim bulletins: "Oct. 22-God."

Each decision about keeping, changing or dropping references (Adler has figured out that 900,000 such decisions were made) was recorded with special words, figures and symbols. As the work wore on, people got married, were divorced, or died. Adler drove everyone (including himself) with frightening energy, frowned on

illness and pregnancy—one woman put off having a baby until the work was done.

"And Don't Come Back until You Believe in God!"

Rah, Rah, Kant! Adler gave regular pep talks to the staff. As they tackled each new idea, he would point out mistakes, make suggestions, urge them to hit that line. Sample: "Aristotle and Aquinas are doing fine, but Kant, Descartes, Plotinus, etc., must catch up . . . Under Topic 2b. I find only three references to Aristotle, and three to Locke. This cannot be all!! Something has got to be done about this . . . We cannot rest on such a random collection with such a major topic. I am sure I am right. Don't give in."

When the work was two-thirds finished, Britannica got discouraged with the amount of money Adler was spending (about $25,000 a month) and called a halt. Adler started phoning desperately. He sent Hutchins around the flank to Britannica's bankers, wangled permission to finish the job with only four editors (it took two more years). When it turned out that Britannica had no funds for an immediate sales campaign, Adler started writing letters, published brochures, finally hopped a plane and started selling in person. Notable catches: William Paley, Paul Mellon, Marshall Field, Conrad Hilton, Harold Swift. His biggest coup: 40 sets at one go to Allied Stores.

A Touch of Megalomania? With the Syntopicon out of the way, Adler might have relaxed, but, as his wife puts it, "He has a clock built inside him." He never stops ticking. His restless eyes have an intensely pained look, particularly when he has to sit still and listen to someone else talk. In appearance, friends have compared him to a better-fed Savonarola. He likes Brooks Brothers suits, good leather, fast cars, fine food (the waitresses at his favorite restaurants are under strict instruction not to tempt him with rolls and desserts), but whatever he enjoys, he usually enjoys in a hurry. He sometimes catches a movie, but rarely finds time to do any light reading—I always have to read some damn great book." His wife has bought him a posture chair, but he shuns it, for fear he might fall asleep reading.

What makes Mortimer run? Says a friend earnestly: "The pursuit of truth." Friends also suspect that he is not always as sure of the truth in his heart as in his mind. He has long ago given up his parents' Jewish religion and has often been on the point of becoming a Roman Catholic. (His two sons, 11 and 13, were confirmed last month in his wife's Episcopal church.) He keeps a favorite cartoon on his office wall to kid his strong views on the need for religion *(see cut).* Once, after a particularly forceful lecture in San Francisco, a woman asked him whether he could have made an equally strong argument for the opposite proposition. "That," sighed Adler, "is the first sensible question of the evening. The answer is yes."

Adler is already off on his next great project, which, if he succeeds, will make the Syntopicon look like an exam pony. Adler wants to summarize all the knowledge of the Western World in one vast work, comparable to Aquinas' 13th century Summa or Diderot's 18th century *Encyclopaedia.* His aim: to help end the Babel of Western civilization, in which specialists in, various fields not only disagree but cannot even argue with each other in the same language. He does not want to reach conclusions, but simply clear the decks for "some future philosophic genius" by summing up the various positions on each question in all fields. Tentative title of the work: *Summa Dialectica.* Adler already has a grant for the project from Paul Mellon's Old Dominion Foundation. He does not expect to live to see it finished, but hopes to train a staff to get it done before century's end.

Says he: “There would be a touch of megalomania in the project, but without megalomania of this sort, nothing can be done, for we have reached that stage of intellectual decay where little things will not avail.” **TIME**

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Perry L. Powell

David Vincent, England

Harold V. Welch, Jr.

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