



SIX GREAT IDEAS

(The Television Series)

TRUTH - GOODNESS - BEAUTY
LIBERTY - EQUALITY - JUSTICE

As broadcast on National Television (PBS)

Each summer since 1951, Mortimer J. Adler conducts a seminar at The Aspen Institute in Colorado. At the 1981 seminar, fifteen leaders from the worlds of business, literature, education, and the arts joined him in an in-depth consideration of the six great ideas that are the subject of this book: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—the ideas we judge by; and Liberty Equality and Justice—the ideas we act on. The group discussions and conversations between Dr. Adler and journalist Bill Moyers were filmed for broadcast on public television, and millions of people followed their exploration of these important ideas. Discarding the out worn and off-putting jargon of academia, Dr. Adler dispels the myth that philosophy is the exclusive province of the specialist. He argues that “philosophy is everybody’s business,” and that a better understanding of these fundamental concepts is

essential if we are to cope with the political, moral, and social issues that confront us daily.

THE PARTICIPANTS:

Alan Bullock,

Fellow of the British Academy, Oxford, England

Francis Mading Deng,

Ambassador of the Sudan to Canada

Betty Sue Flowers,

V P & Dean of Graduate Studies, University of Texas

Jamake Highwater,

Writer and Artist, New York

Joseph E. Slater,

President, Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies

Soedjatmoko,

Rector, United Nations University, Tokyo

Rudiger von Wechmar,

Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany to Rome

Jeremy Bernstein,

Dept of Physics, Stevens Institute of Tech., Hoboken, NJ

Robin C. Duke,

New York

Shirley Hufstедler,

Hufstедler, Miller, Carlson, & Beardsley, Los Angeles

Alexander A. Kwabong,

Vice Rector, United Nations University, Tokyo

Ruth B. Love,

General Superintendent of Schools, Chicago

Robert A. Mosbacher,

Aspen Institute Trustee, Houston, Texas

Jon O. Newman,

U.S. Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals, West Hartford, CT

Gus Tyler,



Thousands of letters also poured in following the series based on Mortimer Adler's book *Six Great Ideas*. In devoting an hour to each of the ideas Adler had examined—truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, and justice—we filmed a spirited debate between the opinionated philosopher and several educators, business executives, writers, lawyers, poets, and jurists. Of the letters provoked by the series, here is my favorite.

Bill Moyers

Dear Dr. Adler:

I am writing on behalf of a group of construction workers (mostly, believe it or not, plumbers!) who have finally found a teacher worth listening to. While we cannot all agree whether or not we would hire you as an apprentice, we can all agree that we would love to listen to you during our lunch breaks. I am sure that it is just due to our well-known ignorance as tradesmen that not a single one of us had ever heard of you until one Sunday afternoon when we were watching public television and Bill Moyers came on with SIX GREAT IDEAS. We listened intensely and soon became addicted and have been ever since. We never knew a world of

ideas existed. The study of ideas has completely turned around our impression of education. We only wish we had not wasted 25-35 years in the process. But we do have you to thank for the next 35-40 years that we have before us to study and implement the great ideas into our lives and into the lives of our communities. We have grown to love the ideas behind our country's composition, and since reading and discussing numerous of your books, we have all become devout Constitutionals. We thank you and we applaud you. We are certain that the praise of a few plumbers could hardly compare with the notoriety that you deserve from distinguished colleagues but we salute you just the same. One last thought—we may be plumbers during the day, but at lunch time and at night and on the weekends, we are Philosophers at Large. God bless you!

NOTE: Here we are providing only the video transcript of the intermittent conversations between Dr. Adler and Bill Moyers.

THE GREAT IDEA OF TRUTH

Part I of 2

BILL MOYERS: Six great ideas—truth, goodness, beauty, liberty, equality, justice. Why these six?

MORTIMER J. ADLER: One answer, Bill, is the Declaration of Independence—the document that every American should understand—and five of those six ideas are in the first four lines of the second paragraph. Let me recite those four lines:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they’re endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. Among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”—which is the ultimate good—“That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” There are five of the six ideas, and the sixth is in another great

document, Pericles' famous speech at the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War in which he was comparing Athenian civilization and culture with the militaristic state of Sparta, and said, "We Athenians cultivate beauty without effeminacy."—There's the six of them.

Now, there's a second reason. Three of these ideas—the first three, truth, goodness and beauty—are the values by which we judge everything in the universe—our ideas, our thoughts, human conduct, the world of nature and the world of artistic products. The second three ideas—liberty, equality and justice—are the ideas that relate you and me, relate people in society. Their equality, their freedom to relate to one another, their just or unjust treatment of one another—they are the ideas that govern our actions. They are the ideas by which we evaluate governments and societies and laws.

MOYERS: One of the oldest of all questions: what is truth?

ADLER: Truth consists in the agreement between what we think and what is in the world, what is real.

MOYERS: *[voice-over]:* Here comes Mortimer Adler, armed with great ideas—six, to be exact. He aims to make us think about truth, beauty and goodness, liberty, equality and justice. And the first of these is truth.

[Titles]

MOYERS: *[voice-over]:* Aspen, Colorado, home every summer for the Aspen Institute. To its seminars come people from all over the world, to take part in intellectual free-for-alls over the classic ideas of Western thought. In their midst, that most demanding and controversial provocateur of all, the philosopher and teacher Mortimer Adler. He's been disturbing the peace of mind in this valley for 30 of his 80 years.

[to Dr. Adler] You've been coming out here a long time.

ADLER: Yes, indeed, more than 30 years.

MOYERS: You've spent a lot more of your time than that with the great books.

ADLER: The great books for me now goes back more than 60 years, back to the 1920s, when I was a student at Columbia University and began reading them under the marvelous guidance of a great teacher, John Erskine. And in fact I've been reading, studying and teaching the great books ever since then.

MOYERS: What led you to them?

ADLER: Well, the attractiveness of this teacher and the course he offered. It took two years: we read about 60 books in two years, and discussed them once a week on a Wednesday night. And I learned, I think, how to discuss the great books and how to lead discussions of the great books from him. Marvelous teacher, John Erskine. And the more I read them, the more I studied them, the more I led discussions of them, the more I discovered that the heart of the great books of the great ideas—the great ideas they discuss—there in those books is the Western discussion, the Western consideration, the Western examination and exploration, and the controversies about the great ideas.

MOYERS: What in particular grabbed you in those early days, when you were just a student?

ADLER: Well, the issues raised, they used to be the most important intellectual issues: and often the most important practical issues that any human being can face are stated in terms of ideas like liberty and equality and justice, or truth, goodness and beauty, man, God, immortality, sin, virtue, happiness. I mean, the great ideas are at the heart of our lives in some sense—certainly, our intellectual lives, no question about that at all.

MOYERS: You're most known to many people for your work in Aspen with this institute.

ADLER: Yes, well, it was in 1950 that Walter and Elizabeth Paepcke first brought me to Aspen, and I've been coming ever since. Walter in 1950 established the Aspen Institute and in the next year we started the first executive seminars that I've been moderating for the last 30 years. And in those executive seminars the central ideas have been liberty, equality, justice, rights, property, tragedy—ideas that I've been considering all my life. And I must say that these Aspen seminars have been the most refreshing and fruitful summers I can possibly spend.

MOYERS: But in addition to moderating the seminars, you've written a lot, haven't you?

ADLER: Oh, yes. In that house there, for example, I wrote two books—the book on the existence of God, and a book on moral philosophy. Back there in the house from which we started, I wrote the book on angels, and a book on the great ideas, and in this house we're coming to along here in a moment, I wrote a book called *The Time of Our Lives* a book called *The Common Sense of Politics*, and a book called *The Difference of Man and the Difference it Makes*. So that along this street, just within these few hundred yards, I've written seven books in Aspen.

MOYERS: What was the idea behind the executive seminars and of bringing adults to the table to discuss these ideas?

ADLER: Well, all, all the people that come to these executive seminars—top executives from our corporations, top persons in United States public life and the professions—they've all become, shall I say, narrow specialists in their fields, and Walter's idea and the idea of the Aspen Institute under Joe Slater has been to open their minds to the great truths, and the great discussions—to make them generalists as well as specialists.

MOYERS: Try to re-educate them.

ADLER: Re-educate them, and they all, I think, appreciate that re-education. I've known almost no one who has come to an Aspen executive seminar that hasn't regarded it as one of the most profitable two weeks in his life.

MOYERS: Is it your feeling that adults can deal with these later in life more easily than they could—

ADLER: It's been said that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, but a human adult is not an old dog. And a human adult can learn very much more than children can. In fact, as you grow—as you become more mature, learning is more fruitful because you have wider experience, wider back-ground to increase and improve your understanding. I've always thought that adult learning was the very—the very essence of human education.

MOYERS: The seminars we're going to be in over the coming days will include people from different cultures. What is your feeling about the cross-cultural exchanges that take place."

ADLER: I think we're still at that stage in the world's development when there is no trans-cultural community. I think we're going to have difficulty having the Easterners and the Westerners, the non-Westerners, talk to one another. But it'll be, even though difficult, the fact—the appearance, the emergence of those difficulties will teach us what we have to do to achieve in the course of time a world cultural community.

MOYERS: But you do think that truth is global?

ADLER: I think that truth is trans-cultural; I think all the fundamental values are trans-cultural.

[discussion at executive seminar]

MOYERS: *[voice-over]:* Nothing so becomes the human being, says Mortimer Adler, as our mind; and nothing gives him more joy than provoking us to use it. His latest book, *Six Great Ideas*, will engage and enrage these men and women who have gathered to debate. You'll meet each by name during this series of films, including a Native American author, an Indonesian philosopher, an oil producer from Texas, a physicist, a lawyer, a judge—15 in all, of diverse experience and opinion, in the company of six great ideas and one Mortimer Adler.

[to Dr. Adler] Why the pursuit of truth?

ADLER: It's the deepest human aspiration; it's the thing that distinguishes mankind from all other animals. In fact, in his pursuit of truth man is—in contemplation of truth, man is most like God.

MOYERS: Most like God?

ADLER: The contemplation of truth—Aristotle thinks of God as being concerned only with the contemplation of truth.

MOYERS: Is it merely—or only—an intellectual pursuit?

ADLER: I think it is. I think it's the mind of man—it is not a matter of the heart, it's not a matter of feelings—it's a matter of the mind, the reasoning mind, the understanding mind that we use to pursue truth.

MOYERS: But are there not works of art, the literature of Carlos Casteneda, for example, that may not be truthful but is meaningful?

ADLER: Oh, yes. I mean, the great—there is poetic truth, of course, but poetic truth is of a totally different kind and I think you're correct in saying poetic truth lies most in its significance rather than in its, shall I say, factual accuracy.

MOYERS: An example?

ADLER: Well, just take for a moment the extraordinary poetic truth in the satirical writing of Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*. Obviously not true in fact, but ex-traordinarily true in meaning.

MOYERS: What difference do you—or what distinction do you draw between objective truth and subjective truth?

ADLER: Objective truth is truth that is independent of individual differences, differences in circumstance, time and place. What is objectively true is always true and true for all men everywhere at all times.

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MEMBER'S DISCUSSION FORUM

Responding to Mr. Reardon's response to my criticism of business donors lobbying White House officials:

First, he said I criticized U.S. Corporations. I didn't even use the C-word. A corporation is a no-person thing, useless to criticize. Note that my last sentence defined 'they' as "very wealthy (persons who) push to shirk taxation . . . and roll back recent progress in protecting the environment and civil rights."

Mr. Reardon defended 'they' in seeking more tax breaks (for themselves), more lawsuit protection (to afford more consumer lawsuits), containment of healthcare costs (reduced

coverage), and relaxed labor and environmental rules (weaker unions, and more pollution).

Because, he says, 'they' (correctly assuming they cloak their main assets in businesses) distribute profits to 1. shareholders, 2. managers, and 3. employees.

No they don't. (Note we're talking generalities, to which there are always minor exceptions.)

1. shareholders, are capital partners entitled to a risk share. But the persons I criticized, 'they', are just a small core within this group—major shareholders. Looking closer at 'they' in Lundberg's well documented book "The Rich and the Super Rich", his government data showed that only one half of one percent—'they'—already owned 30 percent of all business assets outright, with which they CONTROL 90 percent of everything. 'We' don't have much left. Now the concentration has worsened, though they've worked diligently to cloak that. Most 'they' are inheritors, old money. A few are Gates-types, or raiders, etc. 'Inheritance' is really just wealth released back to society by death, which we then allow to go to heirs. It is not a natural right. Heirs receive this wealth transfer by doing little more than sitting on a chair and listening to a Will be read. The many small 'shareholders' are 'along for the ride', placing their bets at the local broker's book, and making 'they' look legitimate. Inheritance taxes are really just the heirs' unearned income, and should be but aren't taxed higher than the earned income of burger-flippers. Besides, it costs society a lot to protect this wealth, and a fee should be charged for that service at least annually. I think that 'they' do NOT distribute anything to 3. which it isn't forced to by union negotiations. This may explain why 'they' is lobbying the Bush administration. Mainly 'they' will benefit from the prosperity of the corporation, to the detriment of 3., us.

2. 'management' are hired managers, financialists, lawyers, marketeers, and lobbyists, just agents of 'they', with whose top managers they negotiate for salaries, perks and bonuses. We're enraged today when they are grossly over-compensated, even when they perform disastrously.

3. 'employees', are persons who negotiate with 2. for wages and benefits, with the aid of law protecting unions.

History: 100 to 150 years ago employees needed violent strikes to force raises, safer working conditions, and get a reduction in work hours from no-benefits 70-hour weeks, to today's 40-hour or less. These wage and hour improvements did NOT destroy businesses, but actually accelerated the entire economy.

Generally employees do NOT benefit when businesses make big profits, get tax cuts, get union rules weakened. The lobbying goals would hurt them.

Tax breaks to 'they', shareholders, only drive stock prices up; but! capital incentives to 'employees' would be spent immediately, stimulating the economy.

It is ludicrous that businessmen still do not see the benefit to themselves of enriching the market by enriching the employees, who ARE the market.

'They' shareholders are hurting democracy, foiling De Tocqueville's "equal conditions". How to correct this? Dr. Adler points out that we persons of equal worth possess unequal capacities. Jefferson says we need a Natural Aristocracy of ability and knowledge, and deleting 'they', the Artificial Aristocracy of fixed or hereditary classes . . . the latter being the core of Mr. Reardon's first group, as documented by Lundberg's data. A good but unlikely way would be to redistribute society's wealth by new fair tax and fee structures.

Terrence O'Neill

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

John Goodman, New Zealand

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