SIX GREAT IDEAS

TRUTH · GOODNESS · BEAUTY
Ideas We Judge By
LIBERTY · EQUALITY · JUSTICE

Ideas We Act On

MORTIMER J. ADLER

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Preface

IT IS WITH THE KIND OF PIETY that Confucius thought should be accorded our ancestors for their contribution to our being that I look upon the sources of this book. I am also observing the Mosaic precept to honor one's father and mother, understood in the broadest sense as paying homage to the sources of one's understanding as well as of one's being.

Working for the Encyclopaedia Britannica Company and with Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago in editing and publishing *Great Books of the Western World*, I produced two volumes on the great ideas, entitled the *Syntopicon*. These were intended to guide readers to the important passages in which the discussion of the great ideas can be found in the great books. In the course of that work, I wrote essays on each of the 102 great ideas, which comprise the chapters of the *Syntopicon*.

The first exploration of the whole realm of great ideas, each in itself and in relation to others, led naturally and almost inevitably to the inception of the Institute for Philosophical Research, conceived as a group of scholars dedicated to cooperative work on the great ideas. Their objective was to take stock of what had been thought about each of those ideas in the whole tradition of Western thought, to identify the diversity of meanings that constitute their inner complexity, to formulate the questions about them that had been disputed, and to examine as well as to assess the opposed voices in the controversies that ensued.

The Institute for Philosophical Research was established in 1952 by a grant from the Ford Foundation when Paul Hoffman and Robert Hutchins were, respectively, its president and vice-president, and by a grant from the Old Dominion Foundation. Since 1956, it has enjoyed sustained and sustaining support from Paul Mellon and Arthur A. Houghton, Jr.

In the course of almost thirty years it has made a good start on the enormous task to which it was originally dedicated. It could not in that time succeed in exploring the whole realm of the great ideas to an extent and to a depth that went far beyond the initial exploration of them in the *Syntopicon*. It would probably take five times thirty

years, or even more, to complete the job that the Institute set for itself.

Nevertheless, the work it has accomplished since 1952 is a respectable and worthy beginning. Its senior fellows and their junior associates have engaged in research and collaboration and have done the writing that has resulted in the publication of a number of books or lengthy monographs: two volumes on the idea of freedom; one volume each on the ideas of justice, happiness, love, progress, and religion; and a monograph on the idea of beauty. With respect to the idea of equality, on which much work has been done over a period of years, a file of unpublished papers has been accumulated.

In addition, I must mention books that I have written during this period with the assistance of my colleagues at the Institute and subject to criticism and revision by them. Those that have a bearing on the six great ideas treated in this book include *The Conditions of Philosophy*, which dealt with the modes of truth and the distinction between knowledge and opinion in the realms of mathematics, science, history, and philosophy, as well as in the sphere of commonsense thought; *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, in which the equality in kind of all human beings was treated in the context of the difference in kind between man and lower animals; *The Time of Our Lives*, subtitled "The Common Sense of Ethics," in which the idea of the good and of man's ultimate good, which is happiness, received examination in the light of distinctions between real and apparent goods, needs and wants, natural and civil rights; *The Common Sense of Politics*, in which the sovereignty of justice was recognized as indispensable to reconciling liberty and equality and maximizing both harmoniously.

In the course of the last thirty years, I have also had the privilege and pleasure of moderating executive seminars conducted under the auspices of the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. The program of readings in these seminars dealt with the ideas of liberty, equality, justice, rights, wealth and property, virtue and happiness. I have profited greatly from the discussions in which these seminars engaged, learning more, I suspect, about the great ideas being discussed than was learned by the participants who were being initiated into the consideration of them.

To all these sources of what is here written about six great ideas, I owe a debt of gratitude as well as an expression of homage and piety, most especially to the benefactors and trustees of the Institute for Philosophical Research, to whom this book is dedicated, as well

as to all my many associates, past and present, at the Institute. I trust they will forgive me for not mentioning all their names.

Contrary to my usual habit, I have not appended a selected bibliography at the end of this book. My reason is that readers who wish to consult the best texts on these great ideas can find them cited in the two volumes of the *Syntopicon* (in Chapters 6, 30, 42, 47, and 94), and also in the *Great Treasury of Western Thought*, in the production of which my Institute and Britannica colleague, Charles Van Doren, collaborated. There they will more easily find important passages on these great ideas, because there they are quoted in full, not merely cited as in the *Syntopicon* (see Chapter 6. Section 3; 9.6; 9.7; 12.2; 12.3; 13.2; 13.3; 16.6).

In closing this Preface, let me confess that I may be tempted in the years ahead to write another book about great ideas; but, with a book about the idea of God already published and with the publication of this one about six of the greatest ideas other than God, it may be that the next book will have to deal with some not so great ideas.

MORTIMER J. ADLER

Aspen, Colorado
July 1, 1980

PART ONE
Prologue: The Great Ideas

CHAPTER 1
Philosophy's Business

IT CANNOT BE TOO OFTEN REPEATED that philosophy is everybody's business. To be a human being is to be endowed with the proclivity to philosophize. To some degree we all engage in philosophical thought in the course of our daily lives.

Acknowledging this is not enough. It is also necessary to understand why this is so and what philosophy's business is.

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 ideas, as we shall see presently, constitute the vocabulary of everyone's thought. Unlike the concepts of the special sciences, the words that name the great ideas are all of them words of ordinary, everyday speech. They are not technical terms. They do not belong to the private jargon of a specialized branch of knowledge. Everyone uses them in ordinary conversation. But everyone does not understand them as well as they can be understood, nor has everyone pondered sufficiently the questions raised by each of the great ideas. To do that and to think one's way through to some resolution of the conflicting answers to these questions is to philosophize.

This book aims to do no more than to provide some guidance in this process. Not for all of the great ideas; that would take a very long book indeed. But for six of them, six of obvious importance to all of us: truth, goodness, and beauty on the one hand; liberty, equality, and justice on the other.

I am not only limiting myself to the consideration of these six ideas. I am also limiting the consideration of them to an elementary delineation of each idea that will try to achieve three results for the reader.

First, it should give the reader a surer grasp of the various meanings of the word he uses when he talks about the idea. In the course of any week, every one of us probably says "That's true" or "That's false" a dozen times. What do we mean when we say that? By what criteria do we make that judgment? And how can we support our

judgment if the person we are talking to challenges us? Getting the idea of truth a littler clearer than it is for most people will help them to answer these questions. When they move, even a little, toward a better understanding of the idea of truth, they are, of course, philosophizing whether or not they consciously think of themselves as doing so.

Second, the delineation of each idea should make the reader more aware than he normally is of questions or issues that he cannot avoid confronting if he is willing to think a little further about the idea—basic ones, ones that human beings have been arguing about over the centuries.

Does what is true change from time to time or is it immutable? Can one thing be true for me and the very opposite true for you? Are all differences of opinion that divide persons into opposing camps capable of being resolved by finding which of the conflicting opinions is true and which false, or are some differences of opinion not matters of truth and falsity at all? What is the answer to the skeptic who claims that the effort to get at the truth is always in vain?

Third, in the consideration of each idea, we are led to the consideration of other ideas. How does our understanding of truth affect our understanding of goodness and beauty? How does our understanding of what is good and bad carry us not only to an understanding of what is right and wrong, but also to an understanding of justice, and how does that affect our understanding of liberty and equality as well?

None of the great ideas is self-enclosed or sealed off from others. Hence, the delineation of each of the six ideas will carry us beyond that idea to one or more of the other five; and when we have considered all six, each in itself and each in relation to the others, we will find ourselves more at home in the whole realm of ideas, or at least more conversant with the bearing that these six ideas have on quite a large number of other great ideas. That is one reason why I have chosen these six. They are truly pivotal ideas—each a center around which a number of other great ideas revolve.

What I have just set down as things I hope to do for the reader is minimal. Much more than that can be done for each of the great ideas. I myself have written two large volumes on *The Idea of Freedom* and some of my colleagues at the Institute for Philosophical Research have written books about the idea of justice, the idea of love, the idea of happiness, the idea of progress, the idea

of beauty, the idea of religion.

These books do a great deal more than what I plan to do here for the six ideas I have chosen. They attempt to take stock of all that has been written about a given idea in the whole tradition of Western thought and they try to clarify that discussion by identifying points of agreement and disagreement and assessing the arguments pro and con on all important issues. Consequently, they are full of quotations from the great thinkers of past and present and they are replete with footnotes. They are certainly worth studying, but they do need to be studied, not just read. In contrast, my plan for this book about six great ideas is to make it one that can be profitably read without being painstakingly studied.

I should also mention one other exploration of the world of the great ideas, in which I was engaged some forty years ago. Then, when the Encyclopaedia Britannica company decided to publish *Great Books of the Western World*, which I helped President Hutchins of the University of Chicago to edit, I prepared, as a guide to the discussion of the great ideas in the great books, something I called a *Syntopicon*. It was so called because it was a collection of some three thousand topics discussed in the great books, organized under each of 102 great ideas, together with references to passages in the great books topic by topic. For each of 102 outlines of topics, I wrote an essay setting forth the development of that idea in the tradition of Western thought, and indicating the major controversies that had emerged in that development.

The chapters in this book that deal with just six out of the 102 ideas about which I wrote essays in the *Syntopicon* will serve a different purpose. I shall not be concerned with the history of these ideas, though I will touch on some of the major controversies to which they have given rise. The *Syntopicon* essays were meant to serve as guides to reading what the most eminent authors in our Western civilization have thought about the great ideas. The chapters of this book are meant to help readers improve their own thinking about the six important subjects I have chosen.

If I succeed in that aim, I will have helped readers to engage in the business of philosophy, which is everybody's business not only because nobody can do much thinking, if any at all, without using the great ideas, but also because no special, technical competence of the kind that is required for the particular sciences and other specialized disciplines is required for thinking about the great ideas. Everybody does it, wittingly or unwittingly. I hope I am right in

believing that everyone would wish to do it just a little better.

CHAPTER 2
Plato, Right and Wrong

WHEN ARISTOTLE'S NAME is turned into an adjective to modify a noun, it is usually attached to the word "logic." We say of an argument we have just listened to, "That's Aristotelian logic," sometimes intending to praise, sometimes to disparage.

So, when Plato's name is turned into an adjective, it is usually attached either to "love" or to "idea." We speak of a certain type of friendship as platonic love; or we say, "That's only a Platonic idea and it has nothing to do with reality."

What underlies the derogatory thrust of the phrase "Platonic idea" is, of course, Plato's theory of ideas, which is hardly a commonsense doctrine that most people readily embrace. On the contrary, when they understand it, they find it runs counter to their commonsense view of the way things are. But it is far from being wholly wrong. Of the two central tenets of Plato's theory of ideas, one was right and the other wrong.

Let us begin with what was wrong about it. For Plato, there were two worlds, not one—the sensible world of changing physical things that we apprehend by means of our senses and the world of intelligible objects that we apprehend by means of our intellects or minds. For him, both are real worlds, where calling them "real" means that they exist independently of our apprehending them.

Even if neither men nor other animals that have eyes or ears or other senses existed, the world of sensible things would exist exactly as it is. So, too, for Plato, even if there were no human beings with the characteristic human ability to think of such objects as truth and goodness, or justice and liberty, these objects would exist—exist independently of all thinking minds. That is why in Plato's view, the idea of the good or the idea of justice has a full measure of reality.

Plato went further. More than a full measure of reality, the world of ideas had for him a superior grade of reality. The physical things that we perceive through our senses come into being and pass away and they are continually in flux, changing in one way or another. They have no permanence. But though we may change our minds about

the ideas we think about, they themselves are not subject to change. Unlike living organisms, they are not born and do not die. Unlike stars and atoms, they do not move about in space. Unlike the familiar physical objects that surround us, they do not get hot or cold, larger or smaller, and so on.

The world of changing physical things is thus for Plato a mere shadow of the much more real world of ideas. When we pass from the realm of sense experience to the realm of thought, we ascend to a higher reality, for we have turned from things that have no enduring existence to enduring and unchanging (Plato would say “eternal”) objects of thought—ideas.

For those of us who cannot shuck off our commitment to common sense, Plato goes too far in attributing reality to ideas, and much too far in exalting their reality over the reality of sensible phenomena—the reality of the ever-changing world we experience through our senses. We do not hesitate to reject Plato’s theory of ideas, and declare him wrong in attributing reality to ideas as well as to physical things, and a superior reality at that. For us commonsense fellows, it is the world of ideas that is comparatively shadowy as compared with the tangible, visible, audible world of things that press on us from all sides.

However, we, too, would be going too far if we regarded ideas as having no existence at all, or regarded them as existing only in our minds when we are thinking. That would make them entirely subjective, as subjective as the feeling of pain you experience when a finger is squeezed too hard, or as subjective as the toothache you have that you can tell me about but that I cannot experience because at the moment it is yours and yours alone.

Plato was right, not wrong, in holding that ideas are objects that the human mind can think about. He was right in insisting on their objectivity. This, understood in the simplest manner possible, amounts to saying that you and I can engage in conversation about one and the same idea because it is an object that you and I are thinking about, just as you and I can engage in conversation about one and the same overcoat when you help me put it on and ask me whether it is warm enough. When you and I discuss truth or justice, the idea of truth or justice is before our minds, or present to our minds, just as much as the overcoat that you help me on with is handled by both of us at the same time.

If anyone has difficulty in understanding this, it is because the word “idea” has two meanings, not one—one in which it is used to refer to

something that is entirely subjective and one in which it is used to refer to something that is quite objective.

In the first meaning, the word has been used to refer to the whole range of entities that comprise the ideational content of our consciousness. In this broad sense of the word, it covers the sensations and perceptions we have, the images we form, the memories we summon up, and the conceptions or notions that we employ in our thinking.

When the word “idea” is used in this way by psychologists, all the various items referred to are certainly subjective. My sensations or perceptions are not yours; the images that occur in my dreams or the memories I dwell upon when I reminisce are mine alone; so, too, are the concepts or notions I have been at some pains to form as I study a difficult science.

To call them all “subjective” is simply to say that they are private, not public. When I speak of them as mine—my perception, my memory, or my concept—I am saying that the perception, memory, or concept in question belongs to me and me alone. You can have no access to it, just as you cannot have access to the toothache I am suffering.

In its other meaning, the word “idea” refers to an object that two or more persons can have access to, can focus on, can think about, can discuss. While this meaning may not be as familiar, neither is it entirely strange or puzzling.

If we disagree about a decision just handed down by the Supreme Court, we may find ourselves challenging each other’s views about justice. If I ask you for your view of justice, I am asking you to tell me what you think about it, and I am also prepared to tell you what I think about it. The “it” here is justice as an object of thought, both your thought and mine, not justice as a concept in your mind, but not mine.

This is not to deny that you and I have concepts in our minds—concepts we think with when we think about justice. Furthermore, your concepts and mine are distinct. But that does not prevent both of us from thinking about one and the same object—an object of thought we call “justice,” and sometimes refer to as “the idea of justice.”

This runs parallel to saying that the quite distinct percepts you and I have are what enable us to perceive when we do perceive one and the same perceptible object. Even though I use my percept and you

use yours, as means or instrumentalities for perceiving a sensible object, the sensible object that we both perceive (such as the overcoat you help me put on) remains one and the same. So, too, you have your memory and I have mine of a football game we both attended, but we can both remember one and the same forward pass that won a victory in the last minute of play.

Let me illustrate the point I am trying to make by harking back for a moment to the book I wrote about the idea of freedom. Because it attempted to examine the whole range of Western thought about freedom, it considered what has been written about that subject by hundreds of authors. Some of them by the way, used the word "freedom," and some used "liberty," but it was always perfectly clear that these were merely two words for the same object of thought.

However, it was not so clear that all of the authors who wrote about the subject, using either the word "freedom" or the word "liberty," were talking about one and the same object. Some, for example, concentrated wholly on the freedom persons enjoy when they can act as they please. This is the liberty of which a person in chains or in prison is deprived. Some were concerned with the freedom of the will—the freedom of choice that those who call themselves determinists deny.

The idea of freedom—or, what amounts to the same thing, freedom as an object of thought—includes both of the freedoms mentioned. When some authors write about freedom, they concentrate on one aspect of it, not another. But all the authors who concentrate on that one aspect of freedom are engaged in thinking about the same object. If that were not the case, it would be meaningless to say that they were in agreement or disagreement about it.

For example, thinking about freedom as consisting in being able to act as one pleases, certain authors hold it sufficient for such liberty to consist in exemption from physical coercion or duress. Others, disagreeing, hold that lack of enabling means might deprive a man of the liberty under consideration. For example, a person without sufficient money is not free to dine at the Ritz, if he or she wishes to.

There would be no disagreement here if both sets of authors were not thinking and talking about one and the same object—that aspect of freedom which consists in being able to act as one wishes or do as one pleases.

What all this comes to can be summed up by advising readers that

this book about six great ideas is not concerned with psychology. It is not concerned with what goes on in people's minds when they think, or what concepts or notions they have in their minds and employ to think with. It is concerned solely with what they have before their minds when they engage in thinking—with objects they are together considering and about which they and other human beings over the centuries have raised questions and, in answering them, have either agreed or disagreed.

For anyone who is incurably addicted to the subjective sense in which the word "idea" is used by most people, I would be willing to drop the word entirely and substitute "object of thought" for it. But I would much prefer retaining the word and have my readers remember that, as I am using it in a book about six great ideas, I am always writing about six great objects of thought that all of us can focus our minds on, not about the particular concepts or notions that each of us may employ in order to do that.

So far, then, Plato was right. Ideas, as objects of thought, do exist. The idea of truth or of justice does not cease to exist when I cease to think about it, for others can be thinking about it when I am not. However, unlike the chair I am sitting on or the book you are holding in your hand, which does not cease to exist as a perceptible object when no one is perceiving it, objects of thought do cease to exist as intelligible objects when no one at all is thinking about them.

There would be stars and atoms in the physical cosmos with no human beings or other living organisms to perceive them. But there would be no ideas as objects of thought without minds to think about them. Ideas exist objectively, but not with the reality that belongs to physical things. On that point, Plato was wrong.

CHAPTER 3
The Vocabulary of Thought

"THAT'S JUST A PLATONIC IDEA and has nothing to do with reality." The slurring dismissal hurled by that statement against the consideration of ideas calls for a reply.

Of all the sciences, only mathematics deals with objects that cannot be perceived by our senses or detected by instruments of observation. The objects that advanced mathematics studies lie totally beyond the reach of the imagination. A schoolboy may think that the triangles or circles he studies in geometry are figures he can draw upon a piece of paper, but no perceptible figure, however carefully constructed with physical instruments, has the mathematical properties that can be demonstrated, but not visibly exhibited.

When the object being considered is an *n*-sided regular polygon, it is clear at once that it is an object of thought, not of perception or imagination. There are, of course, physical couples, triads, and quartets that exemplify the whole numbers 2, 3, and 4; but arithmetic goes far beyond positive integers to fractions, negative numbers, and imaginary ones, and to such objects as the square root of minus one.

Mathematics deals with ideal objects, not real things. That fact does not prevent mathematics from being applied to the world of physical things, and applied with extraordinary power that pays off in handsome practical results. Those branches of the natural and social sciences that apply mathematics, such as mathematical physics and econometrics or mathematical economics, are not only among the most exact, but are also the most fruitful in their production of results.

Like mathematics and unlike all the natural and social sciences, philosophy deals with ideal objects in the first instance. The ideas—the objects of thought—that we reflect upon when we start to philosophize lie beyond the reach of sense perception and imagination. That is why, like mathematics, philosophy can be described as "armchair thinking." No more than mathematics does it employ techniques of observation, experimentation, the gathering of data by empirical research, or an investigation of phenomena by

means of apparatus or instruments. Like mathematics, it is not empirical or investigative.

Nevertheless, as in the case of mathematics, this fact does not prevent philosophy from being useful in thinking about experienced reality—about nature, human behavior, and social institutions. The better our understanding of ideas, especially the great ideas, the better we understand reality because of the light they throw on it.

So much, then, for the slur that ideas have nothing to do with reality. At least, so much for the moment; the rest of this book will provide ample evidence, I hope, that philosophy, like mathematics, is useful in our commerce with the experienced world.

When mathematics is applied to observable phenomena, its application is mediated by measurements made in other sciences, such as physics and economics. Philosophy's application to reality needs no such mediation. It is direct, without intervention by or dependence on quantified data that are required for the application of mathematics and that can be gathered only by the special observational techniques employed by the investigative sciences.

This explains why philosophy can be everybody's business, as the special sciences, including those that apply mathematics, are not. Precisely because it can be everybody's business, it should be part of everyone's general education.

Becoming acquainted and conversant with the great ideas will not prepare the individual for any special career—in business, the learned professions, or highly skilled occupations of one technical sort or another. Specialized schooling is required for that. But everyone is called to one common human vocation—that of being a good citizen and a thoughtful human being.

Only by the presence of philosophy in the general schooling of all is everyone prepared to discharge the obligations common to all because all are human beings. Schooling is essentially humanistic only to the extent that it is tinged with philosophy—with an introduction to the great ideas.

The tests that are employed to obtain some indication of the individual's aptitude for higher education include measurements of the range of his or her vocabulary. The size of a person's vocabulary, measured by the sheer number of words he or she is able to use correctly, is a very crude indication of mental development. While it may be true that a person with a very large vocabulary is one who manifests a wider acquaintance with literature or one who has

greater facility with the written or spoken word, the mere size of the individual's vocabulary certainly does not reveal the breadth or depth of his mind—the scope of his understanding or the development of his ability to think.

In addition, the vocabulary questions included in what are called scholastic aptitude tests consist, for the most part, in quizzing the student about his acquaintance with the meaning of strange words, or at least words that are not frequently used in the give-and-take of everyday speech. It is far from clear what that is supposed to measure.

If the aim were to discover the student's familiarity with a specific branch of knowledge, one way to do that might be to test the individual's ability to use correctly a particular discipline's technical terms. This suggests the kind of vocabulary test that might be used to discover whether a student has the philosophical turn of mind that a good basic schooling would have given the individual if it were essentially humanistic, as it should be.

Unlike the words that usually appear in the vocabulary questions of scholastic aptitude tests, the words that name the great ideas are not strange words or words infrequently used in everyday speech. On the contrary, with few exceptions, they are as familiar and they are used as frequently as the most common words in the ordinary person's vocabulary. In fact, many of them are included in a vocabulary the reach of which does not extend beyond a thousand words.

This does not mean that a person with a vocabulary of this size and one that includes many or most of the words that name great ideas can use these words with a breadth or depth of meaning that manifests a well-grounded acquaintance with ideas or a sufficient understanding of them to render the world of his or her experience more intelligible.

The words that name the great ideas—none of them technical terms in any special science, all of them terms of common speech—constitute the basic vocabulary of philosophical thought, which is also to say the basic vocabulary of human thought. If philosophy is everybody's business, then not only should everyone be able to use these words correctly in a sentence when the standard of correctness is merely grammatical, but also everyone should be able to engage, to some extent, in intelligent discourse about the object of thought under consideration.

How much can the individual say, sequentially and coherently, when

he is asked to consider one or another great idea? What questions is he able to ask about that object of thought? What answers can be given to these questions? Which answers hang together and which are opposed? What practical difference does it make whether we adopt one or another of the opposed answers? And how is one great idea related to others?

I am not sure I could construct a written test that would accurately measure an individual's conversancy with the great ideas. But I am relatively confident that I could conduct an oral examination that would give me a fairly clear indication of the philosophical breadth and depth of a person's mind—the range and reach of his understanding of the great ideas. I would do so by asking questions that pivoted about the words that name these ideas. It would be much better than the vocabulary tests now in use, for, by confining itself to the vocabulary of thought, it would measure more than mere linguistic facility; it would exhibit the stage of intellectual development the individual had attained.

The words that constitute the vocabulary of philosophical or human thought, I said earlier, would almost certainly be included in a vocabulary that numbered no more than a thousand words; perhaps as few as five hundred. *The Great Ideas, A Syntopicon* lists 102 such words. At the time some forty years ago when I was engaged in constructing the *Syntopicon*, I and my colleagues thought 102 was the number we needed in order to delineate the discussion of the great ideas that occurs in the great books of Western civilization. But now, with a different purpose in view, I think I can cut that number down to sixty-four, adding one or two as well as subtracting many.

My purpose now is to list the words that are not only in everyone's vocabulary, but that also name great ideas that everyone who has completed a basic, humanistic schooling should be reasonably conversant with. Only a few of the ideas I am going to name have emerged into prominence in modern times or have taken on special significance in the twentieth century. As Mark Twain correctly quipped, "The ancients stole all our ideas from us." Here, in alphabetical order, are the ones that should be in the possession of human beings at all times, but, perhaps, not in all places, because it must be acknowledged that they are characteristically Western ideas.

ANIMAL

ART

BEAUTY

BEING
CAUSE
CHANCE
CHANGE
CITIZEN
CONSTITUTION
DEMOCRACY
DESIRE
DUTY
EDUCATION
EMOTION
EQUALITY
EVOLUTION
EXPERIENCE
FAMILY
GOD
GOOD AND EVIL
GOVERNMENT
HABIT
HAPPINESS
HONOR
IMAGINATION
JUDGMENT
JUSTICE
KNOWLEDGE
LABOR
LANGUAGE
LAW
LIBERTY (or FREEDOM)
LIFE AND DEATH
LOVE
MAN
MATTER
MEMORY

CHAPTER 4
These Chosen Few

OUT OF SIXTY-FOUR GREAT IDEAS, all of them essential ingredients in the vocabulary of human thought, why just these—TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY; LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE?

One answer jumps out of the page at us as we look at those six words. All, with the one exception of BEAUTY, are pivotal terms in the opening lines of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths …"; "all men are created equal"; "unalienable rights" (which, as we shall see, lie at the heart of justice); "among which are life, liberty …"; "deriving their just powers." And, if we understand "happiness" to consist in living a good human life, then "the pursuit of happiness" requires us to understand what makes a good life good.

In addition, if we turn to the Preamble of the Constitution of the United States, we find among the goals it sets for the government of this republic: establishing justice, securing the blessings of liberty, and promoting the general welfare (the word "welfare" like the word "happiness" requiring us to understand the idea of good).

Finally, there is the renewed pledge to these ideals that Lincoln uttered in his Gettysburg Address when he spoke of a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

We observed in the preceding chapter that everyone is called to one common human vocation—that of being a good citizen and a thoughtful human being—and that, to discharge the obligation common to all human beings, schooling should be essentially humanistic, which is to say that it should provide at least an introduction to the great ideas and some measure of conversancy with them.

If that is so, with which of the great ideas should one begin? Or, to put it another way, which of the great ideas stand out as being of maximum importance for holding the high office of citizenship and performing its duties in a thoughtful manner? The answer is, certainly, ideas that we must understand in order to make our loyalty

to the ideals of this republic more than empty lip service or, worse, blind acceptance of shibboleths.

An intelligent, thoughtful reading of the three prime documents that constitute the American testament turns on a better understanding than most of the graduates of our high schools and colleges now acquire, because basic schooling in this country has sorrowfully departed from the line of general and humanistic learning to which it should resolutely hew. That better understanding is certainly a minimal prerequisite to being a good citizen of this republic.

Putting aside for the moment the obligations of citizenship in a democracy, let us turn to the other element in the vocation common to all—the calling to become a thoughtful human being. This leads us to another answer to the question, Why these chosen few? That answer works somewhat differently for the first three of the six ideas and for the second three.

Two things can be said of both trios with equal accuracy. In both cases, the three ideas that are grouped together do, in fact, belong together; it would be extremely difficult to discuss any one of them adequately without reference to the other two. In both cases, one of the three associated ideas is the sovereign or governing one to which the other two owe some measure of subservience or obedience—truth in the one case, justice in the other.

A further point should, perhaps, be added. Each trio in its own way illuminates a large set of other ideas—ideas that also belong together. In the case of LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE, it is the trio as a whole that functions in this way. Not so in the case of TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY. Here each of the three ideas by itself throws light on a set of related ideas.

It would be too much to say that these chosen few constitute the central source of light that illuminates the whole realm of great ideas—or at least all sixty-four of them named in the preceding chapter. But light is cast on a great many of them by the six I have chosen as a starting point for the exploration of the basic objects of human thought. How can a person become a truly thoughtful human being without engaging in that exploration? If so, what better place to begin?

In order to draw the lines of light that radiate from the chosen six to a large number of other ideas, it is necessary to recognize certain patterns of contexture inherent in the sixty or so great ideas that have been named—patterns that are concealed by a purely alphabetical

arrangement of those ideas. An alphabetical arrangement of anything is a cowardly retreat from an intelligible ordering of the material.

Let us first consider the trio LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE, of which we said that it is the trio as a whole that throws light on other ideas. These three ideas are the ones we live by in Society. They represent ideals which a considerable portion of the human race has sought to realize for themselves and their posterity.

The solitary individual, provided with a comfortable life on a tropical island, would not be moved to cry out for liberty, equality, and justice; nor would he have any occasion to engage in a struggle to achieve them for himself. Only in human society, in which the individual is associated both cooperatively and competitively with other human beings, is there any articulation of claims for liberty, equality, and justice, and only in society do individuals engage in the actions needed to support such claims.

The society may be that of the family or of the state—civil society, the political community. The claims made and the actions taken concern the institutions of society, especially the political institutions of the state, or civil society, and its economic arrangements as well.

These may or may not be just; these may or may not secure sufficient liberty for all; these may or may not provide an equality of conditions. The consideration of these matters involves the application of standards of justice to the laws of the state and especially to its underlying framework of law that is chartered in the constitution. It also bears on the qualifications for citizenship and on the distribution of wealth.

If we seek to understand government itself and the forms of government, especially the antithesis between constitutional government and despotism; if we are moved to consider the desirability of democracy and the threat it always faces from tyranny by the majority; if we recoil from slavery and other forms of human subjection; if we are concerned with violence and war as illnesses that weaken the fabric of society, while at the same time recognizing that revolutions, which may involve violence and war, are sometimes drastic expedients; if we hope for a peaceful resolution of the differences that bring men into conflict with one another—if we engage in thinking about these matters, we cannot get very far without finding that at every turn of thought we must have recourse to an understanding of LIBERTY and EQUALITY as well as JUSTICE.

Our understanding of those three great ideas thus radiates out to

illuminate our consideration of many others. Ticked off in alphabetical order, they are: CITIZEN, CONSTITUTION, DEMOCRACY, FAMILY, GOVERNMENT, LAW, REVOLUTION, SLAVERY, STATE, TYRANNY, VIOLENCE, WAR AND PEACE, and WEALTH.

I turn now to the other trio: TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY. These three ideas are the ones we judge by. Unlike the ideas we live by (LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE), these three function for us in our private as well as in our public life. The solitary individual enabled to live comfortably by himself or herself would still have occasion to judge something to be true or false, to appraise this to be good and that evil, to discriminate between the beautiful and the ugly.

Such judgments, appraisals, and discriminations may also occur, of course, when individuals are engaged in social interaction with one another. But quite apart from all the circumstances of social life, an individual's mind will not be able to avoid making such judgments, appraisals, and discriminations.

Thinking about LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE involves thinking about I and Thou—about the relationships between oneself and other human beings.

Thinking about TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY involves, in the first instance at least, thinking about the whole world in which we live—about the knowledge we have of it, the desires it arouses in us, and the admiration it elicits from us. Here it is the relation of the self to everything else, not just other human beings, which is brought into focus.

I said earlier that, in recognizing the significance of TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY, we must note how each of the three ideas by itself throws light on a set of related ideas. Let us now see how that works out.

We cannot understand the difference between knowledge and opinion without being aware of how each is related to truth. The truth to be found in poetry is not the same as the truth we look for in history, science, or philosophy. The criteria of what is true and false, and the devices we employ to test the truth of anything that is proposed for our affirmation or denial, vary as we pass from mathematics to the empirical sciences, from the empirical sciences to philosophy, and from philosophy to theology and religion.

The very act of making judgments is an act that asserts something to be true or false. The character of the judgments we make—whether judgments that something is or is not the case, or judgments that

PART TWO
Ideas We Judge By: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty