

# What We Get From Reading Great Books

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## FOREWORD

The term "Great Books" as used in this article refers in general to the classics on the lists compiled by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler of the University of Chicago, Stringfellow Barr of St. John's College, and John Erskine of Columbia University, with the exception of the books which fall into the categories of the exact sciences and belles-lettres. Those surviving this subtraction come under the broad terms of philosophy and social science, and it is just these Great Books which this article considers. — The Author.

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Because of the publicity given to the Great Books movement, many people have formed erroneous ideas about what the Great Books offer. They feel that a reading of the Books will introduce them to a marvelous clarity of mind and the true path to intellectual satisfaction. After mastering the Great Books, they believe they will be able to sit back, relax, and admire themselves for knowing the universe and everything in it as acting according to an unequivocal, "true" principle.

Robert Hutchins, the vociferous leader of the Great Books movement, states on page 66 of *The Higher Learning in America*, "Education implies teaching. Teaching implies knowledge. Knowledge is truth. The truth is everywhere the same." From a further application of these premises, I deduce that education consists of learning the truth which is everywhere the same. Then on page 85, Hutchins says, "We have then for general education a course of study consisting of the greatest books of the western world . . ." From this I further deduce that this education, immutable truth, is to be extracted from a comprehensive reading of the Great Books.

But, I ask, how can that be possible? How can a general reading of all or of most of the Great Books give us this truth which is everywhere the same? I do not deny the existence of objective truth, but I do deny that the Great Books taken as a whole lead to its discovery. How can all of the Great Books teach us this one truth when there is such widespread and violent disagreement among various books? I think that anyone who begins reading the Great Books with the ideal of finding one truth will soon be frustrated. The following citations are just a few of the disagreements among the greatest thinkers of all ages.

Hobbes reduced everything to matter while Spinoza claimed that everything is both body and spirit, which are identical with nature and God. For this philosophy Spinoza, who was born a Jew, was repudiated and persecuted by orthodox Jews, who based their belief on the **Old Testament**.

Berkeley said that reality exists in the realm of thought alone while Hume denied the very reality of mind.

Hobbes (**Leviathan**) stated that all men are manifestly equal in mind and body, but his predecessor, Aristotle, said that men are not equal naturally; some are born for slavery, others for domination.

Robert Hutchins and John H. Newman, by giving metaphysics such a celebrated position in higher education, disregard the antime-taphysical writing of Hume (**Enquiry Concerning Human Under-standing**), Comte (**Positive Philosophy**), and even perhaps Kant (**Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics**). However, the last three men would have a difficult time persuading such present day thinkers as Whitehead (**Process and Reality**), Santayana (**Realm of Essence and Realm of Matter**), and Maritain (**Degrees of Knowledge**) that metaphysics is invalid or non-existent. These believers of metaphysics could summon the support of many famous philosophers of the past: Plato (**Timaeus**, **Parmenides**, and the **Sophist**), Aristotle (**Meta-physics**), St. Thomas Aquinas (**Being and Essence**), Leibnitz (**Dis-course on Metaphysics**), Descartes (**Principles of Philosophy**), Spinoza (**Ethics**), and Hegel (**Phenomenology**).

Epicurus advised people to enjoy life while they could, for the next day they might be dead, while Zeno advised people to withstand life while they could, for the next day they might still be alive to withstand more.

Hobbes, Marx, and the Federalists would all disagree on government. Hobbes wanted one leader who was above reproach; once a contract had been made giving him the sole power of government, it could never be broken. Marx suggested that citizens overthrow their monarch by violence—an idea most repugnant to Hobbes. The Federalists, on the contrary, were interested neither in having an irreproachable monarch nor in an equal distribution of economic wealth, for American economy was to be built on free enterprise.

John Dewey favors the philosophy epitomized in the phrase, "When in Rome do as the Romans do," while Joseph Butler, were he still alive, would likely coin the phrase, "When in Rome do as all mankind ought to do, regardless of local custom."

Hobbes dreaded the state of nature, but Rousseau thought that perhaps it was not so dreadful to be freed from the chains which bind civilized man.



Bentham's **Comment on the Commentaries** is an attack on Blackstone's **Commentaries on the Laws of England**.

Rousseau (**The Social Contract**) said that, "of all societies, the only one that is natural is the family." Plato (**Republic**) would hardly concur in this opinion, since the adults of his Ideal State were to engage in communal breeding, the best men with the best women. Then, at birth the child would be given to the state. After such mandatory breeding, the individuals were free to cohabit with whomever they desired.

Aristotle condemned dictatorship for a reason not unlike the reason Hobbes used to praise dictatorship—the investiture of the common interest in one supreme individual.

It might succinctly be stated that Leibnitz was busy spiritualizing the material while Hobbes was materializing the spiritual.

Montaigne ("On Custom") showed that man acts relative to his environment, while Newman ("Definition of a Gentleman") claimed there is one objective standard by which a man should act.

**Freedom in the Modern World** shows how Jacques Maritain would disagree with Marcus Aurelius' **Meditations** and Lucretius' **On the Nature of Things**.

Kant's valuation of human reasoning power was different from almost all previous thoughts on the same subject.

Leucippus and Democritus propounded a mechanical explanation of the universe while Democritus' student, Anaxagoras, conceived an all-knowing Intelligence, which maintained order in the Universe. An Athenian court found Anaxagoras guilty of impiety and only by his hasty flight did he avoid the fatal consequences.

Plato (**Gorgias**) evoked serious criticism of the Sophists of whom the most famous were Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, and Hippias.

So, I ask the reader, how can Dr. Hutchins use these books, almost every one of which contradicts or opposes every other one, to convey the teaching of truth which is everywhere the same? I see how a certain group of the Great Books would serve in general one end or one system of thought, but a belief resulting from a consideration of the Great Books as a whole would be amorphous to say the least.

However, I do not mean to say that reading the Great Books is without value. The most brilliant minds of history are included in the list and we must pay attention to them. But, I think the value we derive is primarily negative . . . negative in that we learn not to adopt blindly one system because it is the first to come along or because this or that book was written by a famous person. A general reading of the Great Books will make us more cautious, discriminating, tolerant, and broad. It will make us more aware of the social,

Legally, perhaps, the Duke of Savoy was justified, since he could dictate the religion of his subjects, according to the principle of **Cuius regio eius religio**, which was established by the peace of Augsburg in 1555. But Europe was tired of religious fanaticism; it was only seven years since the Thirty Years War had ended. Charles Emmanuel, apart from the moral questionableness of his position, thus found himself the object of an unfavorable regard in almost every court in Europe, except possibly in the Vatican and the Escorial.

Cromwell had taken upon himself the role of protector of the protestants of Europe which Gustavus Adolphus had held until his death in 1632. He was the most powerful and vigorous ruler England had had since Elizabeth died, and his foreign policy had made the Protectorate respected all over Europe. Consequently England took the lead in remonstrating with the Duke of Savoy and urging the protestant monarchs of Europe to take a like course. Letters were sent to Charles Emmanuel and to Louis XIV, who were directly involved, as well as to the princes and rulers of northern Europe. Sir Samuel Morland was sent on a special mission to Turin, and £38,000 were collected in England to relieve the sufferers. Cromwell himself gave £2,000 to this fund, and the money was entrusted to the city of Geneva for dispersion. His Most Christian Majesty, or rather Cardinal Mazarin, who had succeeded Richelieu as first minister of France, hastily disavowed the whole sorry business, and it is quite probable that this disavowal was sincere enough, since Mazarin had continued Richelieu's policy of toleration. The Duke of Savoy, faced with the disapproval of most of Europe, had to back down; and the Vaudois were granted a precarious peace. Their worship, however, was prohibited, a hostile garrison was quartered on them, and their leaders were exiled.

The Latin Secretary for the Lord Protector, who drew up the letters which Cromwell sent to Savoy, to France, to Switzerland, to Holland, to Denmark, and to Sweden, was, of course, in the midst of all this. Undoubtedly he read the dispatches from Geneva and Turin, in which the cruelties were described. Since this was persecution of protestants, and thus could not, like Cromwell's treatment of the Irish, be condoned, he was, of course, horrified. The persecution was inhuman, for one thing, and, for another, it was an attempt forcibly to change men's religious convictions. And, when these convictions were protestant convictions, Milton was a firm believer in freedom of religious preference.

We have, then, his eighteenth sonnet, "On the Late Massacher in Piemont." It gives poetic expression to what Milton had been writing



political, economic, moral, and philosophic problems facing man, and will offer us many different systems which might be applied to these problems.

## THE SETTING OF MILTON'S EIGHTEENTH SONNET

Quentin West

The Waldenses, or Vaudois, are adherents of the oldest protestant heresy in Europe; it arose in 1170, taking its name from Peter Waldo, a merchant of Lyons, in France, and spread into the mountain valleys to the southwest of Turin, in the Duchy of Piedmont and Savoy, where it exists to this day. It, of course, was often subject to persecution by the Holy Office, since the Dukes of Piedmont and Savoy were Roman Catholics. It is interesting to note, in passing, that the last member of this family lost the throne of Italy only a few years ago. In 1487, Innocent VIII issued a bull calling for the extermination of these heretics; but this crusade proved abortive, and created such havoc that the Duke finally put a stop to it, and granted a limited toleration. For a while, at least, the Vaudois were let alone; after all, crusades had gone out of fashion. In 1530, these simple peasants sent representatives to the leaders of heresy at Geneva, and, after they had made a number of changes in their crude and simple doctrines and practices, were absorbed into the general current of religious revolt. This was regrettable, for, in 1650, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, who were charged with stamping out heresy everywhere, set up a local council in Turin, and Charles Emmanuel II, Duke of Savoy, came under their influence. In 1655, he ordered the reduction of the Vaudois to the limits of their ancient territory, and an army, made up partly of troops of Louis XIV, and partly of Irish refugees, invaded their valleys during the week of October 17, 1655. Unfortunately the soldiers, and especially the Irish, who had bitter memories of the horrible cruelty of Cromwell in 1650, when prisoners had been slaughtered by having their skulls crushed by the butts of muskets, in order to save powder, were savage, and the Vaudois were subjected to barbarities which shocked all Europe.