**Prologue: Why 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 functions 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 something ought or ought not to be—cannot be understood without seeking an answer to a fundamental question about radically different modes of truth.**

**We must also ask whether truth exists only in judgments of the mind or also in statements we make when we use language; whether there is truth in the senses, the memory, and the imagination, as well as in the mind; whether the kind of truth that makes our reasoning valid is the same kind of truth as that which makes our judgments sound; whether appeal to experience is always an ultimate test of truth.**

**Here, then, ticked off in alphabetical order, are the ideas that our understanding of TRUTH helps us to understand a little better: EXPERIENCE, IMAGINATION, JUDGMENT, KNOWLEDGE, LANGUAGE, MEMORY, MIND, OPINION, POETRY, REASONING, RELIGION; to which we might add the ideas that are related to knowledge and opinion—MATHEMATICS, PHILOSOPHY, SCIENCE, THEOLOGY.**

**The idea of GOODNESS has its own sphere of influence. We cannot think of the good without thinking of the desirable, or of the desirable without thinking of the good. One of our most frequent uses of the word good is in such phrases as “a good man,” “a good will,” and “a good life.” Our understanding of what is meant involves our understanding of the virtues as good habits, proceeding from a good will, and of happiness, or a good life, as one that is enriched by the possession of all good things, among which certainly are wealth, honor, the love of friends and family, a decent amount of pleasure and avoidance of pain, knowledge and especially wisdom, not to mention a healthy life, liberty, equality, and the supporting conditions provided by a good society—one that is just and peaceful.**

**Once again ticked off in alphabetical order, here are the ideas on which our understanding of GOODNESS throws light: DESIRE, FAMILY, HABIT, HAPPINESS, HONOR, LIFE (a healthy One), LOVE, MAN, PLEASURE AND PAIN, VIRTUE AND VICE (perhaps also SIN), and WILL. One might go a bit farther and add EMOTION because it is involved in the effort of the will to be good and to form the good habits that are the virtues; and if SIN is touched on, then perhaps we may not be able to avoid questions about the goodness of GOD and about man’s goodness in relation to GOD. In addition to all of these, we cannot fail to note that the consideration of GOODNESS relates to ideas already mentioned in other connections: not only KNOWLEDGE and PEACE, but also the great ideas that comprise the other trio: LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE.**

**BEAUTY has the smallest circle of related ideas the understanding of which it affects. We expect to find beauty in works of art and poetry, especially the products of the arts that are sometimes called “fine arts” in contrast to “useful arts,” and sometimes beaux arts, or arts of the beautiful. We also expect to find it in the things of nature. Beauty, like goodness, is thought to inhere in objects that we desire or love. It affords us a certain experience of pleasure, one that occurs in the sphere of our knowing (knowing that involves the senses, the imagination, and the mind) rather than in the sphere of our actions. Thus, the other great ideas, in alphabetical order, to which BEAUTY relates are: ART, DESIRE (perhaps also EMOTION), EXPERIENCE, IMAGINATION, KNOWLEDGE, LOVE, MIND, PLEASURE AND PAIN, POETRY, and SENSE.**

**The reader who carefully examines all the lines of light or strands of influence that delineate the bearing of the chosen six on other great ideas will see that, of the two trios, the first is the more fundamental. It dominates the second. The values it encompasses are transcendent and universal, applicable to everything. That is why we will begin with it, devoting Part Two of this book to the ideas we judge by (TRUTH, GOODNESS, and BEAUTY) and then going on, in Part Three, to the ideas we live by and act on (LIBERTY, EQUALITY, and JUSTICE).**

**In the chapters of Parts Two and Three that lie ahead, I will attempt to say no more about each of the ideas under consideration than will recommend itself to common sense as worthy of assent without reliance upon the intricate subtleties of analysis or argument. There is, of course, more to say. A great idea is almost always one about which challenging questions have been raised. The great philosophical questions are, for the most part, questions about the great ideas.**

**These questions, which have been disputed by those who have devoted their lives to philosophical thought, require more protracted and profound reflection than is appropriate in an introductory exploration such as this. However, there may be readers who wish to push farther in their thinking than this book carries them. For them, I have appended, in Part Four, an epilogue that presents questions they may wish to ponder and issues on which they may attempt either to take sides or to suspend judgment.**

**-** Mortimer J Adler, *Six Great Ideas,* –Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Liberty, Equality and Justice