

*A Study of the Great Ideas
(Good and Evil)*



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The Study of the Great Ideas in the Great Books

Introduction

A good education should include an opportunity for students to wrestle with some of the weighty questions that come with living. Who am I? Why am I here? Is there a God? Who is He? What does He require of me? What is valuable or worthwhile? What are the principles of right and wrong? For centuries great thinkers have proposed answers to these and other questions. The implications of their answers are all around us. We call it culture and Western Civilisation as it exists is a veritable cornucopia of competing worldviews – all of them out to get control of our minds and to move us to live as becomes a disciple of their way.

Surely, ideas have consequences. They do not exist in a vacuum. As one thinks, so he is. There can be little disagreement that the study of ideas is important. However, there are probably more than 400 basic ideas to explore and discuss. To look at them all would be to take the proverbial route that is a mile wide and an inch deep. Therefore, we have sought to help students understand what might be considered the most foundational of all these ideas: God and Man; Truth and Lies; Goodness and Evil; Beauty and Ethics. The order of the studies is significant as it follows, more or less, the progression of the Trivium; that is, grammar level understanding (God and Man) to rhetorical application in a look at what constitutes beauty and ethical living. Upon completion our hope is that students will be able to articulate that an understanding of truth, for example, significantly impacts the idea of what is good or even what is beautiful. Further an understanding of what is good will affect the view of what is right and wrong; what is just; what is freedom; what is equality. The connectedness goes on and on, becoming for the student his or her worldview; that is, how they will live in this present age.

In 2003 we launched our first level of *Tree of Life's Study of the Great Ideas Through the Great Books*. *The Study of the Ideas of God and Man* has proved to be challenging and stimulating for many students. In 2004 we introduced our second level: *The Study of the Ideas of Truth and Lies*, exploring some core questions that arise when young people begin to read critically. 2005 saw the addition of *The Study of the Ideas of Good and Evil*. Our four year study of the Great Ideas was rounded out with the completion of *The Study of the Ideas of Beauty and Ethics*. However, as students who have gone through every level have discovered, their wrestling with the Great Ideas has only begun. Enjoy the journey!

The Study of the Ideas of Good and Evil

“I am the Alpha and Omega, The Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.”
Rev. 22:13

“Man is the measure of all things.”
Petagorus

“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”
John 14:6a

“You will not surely die.”
Satan (Gen. 3:4)

...so sums up our study over the last two years of the ideas of God, Man, Truth, and Lies. But, what about the ideas of Good and Evil? We run into these words almost every day and across many disciplines. One can hardly consider studies in theology, ethics, psychology, politics, or art (just to name a few), without wrestling with questions about the existence and manifestation of Good and Evil. To be sure, what we come to believe about Good and Evil will have a bearing on how we relate to truth and falsity; beauty and ugliness.

Mortimer Adler sates, “The true is the good of our thinking and the beautiful is a quality that certain things have when they are good as objects of contemplation, love, or as production.” While we might quibble with Adler’s ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty, we should agree that we can better understand goodness and beauty in terms of truth, and truth and goodness in terms of beauty. While they can be considered separately, they are best understood in relation to one another. You will recall that one of the primary aims of the study of the Great Ideas through the Great Books is to contemplate what is True, what is Good, and what is Beautiful.

As you have probably predicted, our view of Good and Evil will be rooted in our concept of God and Man. The psalmist writes, “Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good!” (Psalm 136:1) This goodness of God expressed in this psalm is reiterated throughout Scripture. It is multi-faceted and speaks of God’s sovereign redemptive love; His kindness and generosity to all His creatures; His pity to those in distress; His patience.

On the other hand if, like Protagorus, a person sees “man as the measure of all things”, Good and Evil are not rooted in the character of a Supreme Being who has created man in His own image. These ideas then become, in the words of Montaigne, “in large part the opinion we have of them”. Like Shakespeare’s Hamlet we are free then to determine for ourselves what, if anything, is evil.

So the stage has been set and through the ages thinkers of all stripes have debated the existence, source, and effect of Good and Evil on our world. Some have sought the right

application of Good for their own benefit; others for the Common Good of society; and the rest, the Greatest Good for the greatest number. Few have actually sought what *they considered* to be Evil. However, all, in one form or another, have had to decide on answer to key questions: Is there a God? If so, who is He? What is He like? What does He require of me? Does Truth exist? If so, how do I apply it to all areas of my life? They also probably wrestled with the same questions that you will tackle this year: Does Good and Evil exist? If so, what are their attributes? How do they affect my perception of the world? My actions? How am I to seek Good? What conflicts arise as I seek to do this?

“Hey, wait a minute!” you might be saying. “Haven’t I already dealt with many of these questions in the books, poems, and stories that I’ve read over the last two years?”

Congratulations! You’re quite astute if this has occurred to you at any time while you’ve been reading this introduction. (That’s the good news.) The better news is that you will, no doubt, re-visit many of the questions and ideas already studied and begin to explore their interconnectedness with this year’s ideas of Good and Evil. Welcome to the Great Conversation! Uncle Screwtape will not be happy.

Outline

The following schedule is given in the hopes that it will help you work your way through the course requirements with greater ease than if left to set up your own schedule. You will of course understand that you might spend an entire year studying only one the required books - indeed with some you could spend a lifetime. However, it is not within the scope of this Great Ideas course to fully mine all that there is to learn from the books that you will read. It is hoped that you will certainly get something from them and, at the very least, that you will be less intimidated by the thought of tackling more of the great literature of Western Civilisation by the time you finish this year than you were before you started.

The following schedule is just a guideline and the amount of time to be spent on each work is only a suggestion. You may find that you need an extra week to work through one book while not as much time as is suggested to study another. So be it! However, try to keep the big picture in sight at all times. The course is designed to be completed in one “academic” year (about 32 weeks). You should make every effort to do so. For the average student this may mean committing three hours or more each day to reading, answering questions, and preparing essays. You may even find that extra time will need to be spent completing the reading selections. That said, try to work on the material when you are freshest. The material demands your best and you will benefit most if you put an honest effort into the course work. It is expected that you will complete the requirements in the order they are presented. All the best!

Suggested Schedule for Study of the Great Ideas

Good and Evil

How to Read a Book (1 week)

Ivanhoe (1 week)

The Iliad of Homer (3 weeks)

Essay on The Iliad (1 week)

Short Story Unit (2 weeks)

Beowulf (2 weeks)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (1 week)

The Bible (2 weeks)

Hamlet (1 week)

An Ideal Husband (1 week)

Macbeth (2 weeks)

Wuthering Heights (1 week)

The Screwtape Letters (2 weeks)

The Great Divorce (1 week)

Essay on Good and Evil (1 week)

Lord of the Flies (1 week)

Poetry Unit (1 week)

Calvin's Institutes - Book Three (2 weeks)

Moby Dick (2 weeks)

The Universe Next Door (2 weeks)

Final Essay (1 week)

Total - 31 weeks

Study Guide for The Iliad

Background: In Year One of this Great Ideas course, you read the story of the Trojan War in Edith Hamilton's Mythology. This year, you have the opportunity to obtain more of an appreciation for the magnificent epic, The Iliad by reading the real thing (in translation of course). The Iliad was written or at least composed by the great Greek poet, Homer, who probably lived sometime during the 8th Century BC. For more than 27 centuries this poem has been an important part of Western oral and written tradition.

The Iliad is prized by scholars for its beauty, literary excellence, imaginative power, and drama. But it is much more than this. As you read and study the poem this year, you will find yourself saying, "Hey! I've read something like this before." Indeed, you probably have, as many great writers throughout the ages have modelled their work after the Homeric epic.

However, there is even much more than this. The Iliad expresses themes and deals with issues that strike a chord with every person. This is because all great poetry has a universality about it that lifts the mind and soul of its reader above the particulars of the poem. In The Iliad, Homer confronts us with the Greek concept of honour, courage, wrath, love, friendship, grief, vengeance, forgiveness, fidelity, and endurance. (*Invitation to the Classics*, pg. 30) He also portrays for us classic characters:

Helen, the beauty whose kidnapping set two great armies at odds with one another.

Achilles, half man/half god, who seems an uncomfortable hero for many.

Hector, the great Trojan who defends home and family even though the reason is distasteful to him.

Paris, the sniveling coward who steals another man's wife and expects others to defend his unjust actions.

And a cast of thousands, each bigger than life. This would seem to be the stuff of a giant Hollywood blockbuster. Alas, Homer beat them to the punch by centuries.

Heroism was important to the Greeks and The Iliad is full of heroes. Do you recall the story of Odysseus slaying all the suitors for his wife after his long absence from Ithaca? When he is done, there are two suitors left – a poet and a priest. He kills the priest and leaves the poet. The reason? To the Greeks poets were a gift from the gods. They were to be honoured and respected. Of course, who else would be left to tell of the heroic deeds of Odysseus? The bard of course. So, you see that self-glorification defines the Greek hero and no two heroes in The Iliad better depict this essential Greek virtue than Hector and Achilles. Both men are driven by different motives, but both are clearly heroes in the Greek sense of the word. This you will see in abundance throughout the poem. Watch for it.

Another obvious aspect of The Iliad is that it is a war story. War is necessary if the hero is to

be – well – a hero. What is ironic, however, is that for the most part, the Greeks despised war. Unlike the Romans who loved a good war story, the Greeks saw the destruction and desolation that war brought. We see this clearly with the ruin of Troy. The victorious Greeks, after ten years of hard combat and tedious siege, willingly participate in the sack of the great city, but the thrill of victory is masked by the despair of destruction. Lovers of peace who glorified the hero. It is a complex combination and one that Homer tackles throughout the poem. Watch also for this.

In a day when our culture generally sees heroism as good and war as evil, we will struggle with the way that Homer portrays his heroes and the “matter of factness” of the battle scenes. You will see good and evil in a volatile cocktail. You will come to understand the Greek mind more and more and hopefully to see some of what is good and evil in our own culture. It almost goes without saying that you will also revisit ideas that have been covered in the first two levels of the Great Ideas for Homer also reveals much of the Greek ideas about God, man, truth, and lies. Then again, how could it not be so? Homer has long been a participant in the Great Conversation.



Lesson One

Read Book One

1. Achilles is one of the heroes of The Iliad. What do we know about the prophecy of his future that is significant to the story?

2. Why is Achilles angry in Book One?

3. Based on what you have read thus far, what kind of leader is Agamemnon? Explain.

<p><i>Tree of Life School</i></p> <p><i>Good and Evil</i></p>			
Assignment	Essay	Description	Mark
1		How to Read a Book Study Guide	
2		Ivanhoe	
3		The Iliad Study Guide	
	1	Essay on the Iliad	
4		Short Story Unit	
5		Beowulf Study Guide	
6		Sir Gawain and the Green Knight	
7		The Bible Study Guide	
8		Hamlet	
9		An Ideal Husband	
10		Macbeth	
11		Wuthering Heights	
12		The Screwtape Letters Study Guide	
13		The Great Divorce	
	2	Essay on Good and Evil	
14		Lord of the Flies	
15		Poetry Study Guide	
16		Calvin's Institutes Book III Study Guide	
17		Moby Dick	
18		The Universe Next Door Study Guide	
	3	Final Essay on Good and Evil	
		Final Mark	