

# A Study of the Great Ideas (Beauty and Ethics)



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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 Beauty and Ethics

“All good things must come to an end.” ...or so the saying goes. In the sense that we have arrived at the fourth and final level of our study of the Great Ideas through the Great Books, and, assuming that you can truly call the last three years *good*, the old saying has some merit. But, as you probably suspect, this is not the end. Deep down you know it is only the beginning. You have only scratched the surface of the Great Conversation. For, as you have read syntopically on the ideas of God and Man, Truth and Lies, Good and Evil, you have no doubt come to a better understanding of what you believe and how these beliefs affect the way you ought to live. Yet, you also have probably thought that the more you consider these ideas, the more you realize how much you don't know! Regardless it is now time to push on - to consider more seriously the idea of Beauty and, as a conclusion of sorts, how you ought to decide how to live – what we will call a study of Ethics.

It is probably clear to you by now that the ideas you have been studying are intricately intertwined; that is, that your view of one will necessarily influence your view of another. This will also be apparent to you as you consider the ideas of Beauty and Ethics. In a sense both can quite rightly be seen as the fruit or flower of your previous studies, yet both ideas do not lend themselves to the neat comparison/contrast relationship that characterized the ideas in the previous levels. Therefore, you will deal with them separately – roughly a half of the year devoted to each.

Enjoy the literature chosen for this year's study, but more than enjoy, determine to act on what you have learned. Determine to make these four years not an end, but a true beginning. Determine to seek the jewel of wisdom in all its facets, and determine to pursue it in faith, without doubting, so that you will not be like the double-minded man, unstable in all he does. Thank you for being part in the Great Conversation.

#### Beauty

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” It would seem that a nodding agreement to this old maxim would bring an end to our study post haste. Why? Well, inherent in this statement is the assumption that little or no criteria beyond personal taste can be advanced in determining what is or is not beautiful. If it is true that what is beautiful for you may not be beautiful for me, it would seem that the postmodernists may have won the day after all. If we are free to create our own meaning of beauty, independent of all else, than maybe we can indeed do the same for truth, goodness, or any of the Great Ideas.

Yet, can this really be? Is Beauty merely subjective? Can there not be objective standards for judging what is beautiful and what is not? Many have tried to capture some sort of objective standard in the past. Most notably, Thomas Aquinas, the great 13<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic theologian, set forth essential standards for Beauty, saying that for something to be beautiful it must have integrity, proportion, harmony, and clarity. He equated Beauty closely with

Goodness. For him goodness calms our desires while beauty calms it by being seen or known. Hence, Aquinas would listen to the music of someone like John cage with a rather pinched expression. He would see no clarity, no harmony, no integrity, therefore, no Beauty. While you probably would agree with Aquinas concerning the lack of Beauty in Cage's music, what about judging the degree of beauty in a particular landscape, a person, a painting, a building, or a culture? Things start to get a little fuzzy.

Like most ideas, we can probably find a sort of middle ground in our discussion. Surely there must be some kind of objective standard for Beauty through which room is left for individual taste. Mortimer Adler supports the importance of coming to an understanding of objective standards for Beauty by noting that in cultures where acceptance of subjectivism and relativism in the sphere of Beauty are accepted, this then spreads to judgements of good and evil, and then to statements about truth. What he is saying is that if beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then surely the line between good and evil and truth and lies will soon be blurred. It would also seem that his observations work the other way as well. As we become more given to relativism in terms of truth and goodness, our idea of beauty follows suit. Can we not see this played out in our culture today? Sadly, even among Christians, we can see that the war rages over what is beautiful and what is not.

The Christian camp can essentially be divided into three groups in its view of the beautiful. In the area of art, for example, fundamentalists tend to look with suspicion and isolate themselves from all contemporary attempts at artistic expression. Transformational Christians campaign for believers to engage and renew the arts. Finally, synthesists tend to justify most forms of art and use them as a means of something good in and of itself. And, if you step out of Christian circles, you'll be faced with a multitude of opinions of what constitutes Beauty. If you don't believe this, take a walk through your local mall this Friday night!

It should be apparent by now that the idea of Beauty is a complex one. Socrates put it simply and...well, beautifully. "Beautiful things are difficult," he said. Indeed they are. However, we must not avoid them because they are difficult. The Bible urges us to pursue an understanding of Beauty - the beauty of nature, beauty in the arts and architecture, beauty of people and nations, and, of course, the definition of Beauty itself, the Shekinah glory of God. It is hoped that this year's study will open your eyes and sharpen your senses, but it is also hoped that it will continue to engage your intellect.

A right understanding of Beauty must necessarily go hand in hand with a right understanding of Truth and Goodness. You cannot have one without the others, or, at least, you cannot possess it wholly. These three (Truth, Goodness, Beauty) have been described as both the fundamental and transcendent values of culture, values by which all other values are judged. We see this idea clarified quite wonderfully in Tolkien's tale, The Lord of the Rings. For those of you who have read this work you will recall the state of the Shire prior to Frodo's quest to destroy the ring. The Hobbits existed in a sort of idealized agrarian paradise. For the most part

integrity, harmony, clarity reigned and it was beautiful. Now, recall the state of the Shire toward the end of the book when the four hobbits return. The evil wizard, Saruman, had taken up residence at Bag End where he and his group of ruffians had begun to transform the Shire into a wasteland. No integrity, no harmony, no clarity...no Truth, no Goodness, and certainly, no Beauty. It is not until Frodo and his friends rally the other hobbits to stand for what is True that their Goodness can be seen in action. And only when the Shire is scourged of all Lies and Evil does Sam have a chance to begin to return his land to its former state of Beauty. Oh read the Lord of the Rings with fresh eyes! Tolkien captures the relationship between Truth, Goodness, and Beauty as only he could.

Ultimately what you believe concerning Truth, Goodness, and Beauty will depend on how you answer this question: *Is God or man the measure of all things?* In the end this will determine how you will live in this present age. And that leads us to our final topic...

### Ethics

Simply stated ethics is the study of right and wrong. In any study of ethics you will learn to make judgements concerning the way you will choose to live. It is also here that you will determine what motivates you to live as you do. To illustrate this, let us consider a small child. Early on this child may learn whether stealing is either right or wrong. Usually he will accept this teaching without question. However, the day soon arrives when that child will need to choose how he will live. Using our example, he must ask himself, "Will I steal or not?" Not only that but he also must consider his reason for the decision he makes.

Now, as an astute reader, you will have noted that we have strayed a bit beyond the realm of pure ethics (judgement) and have moved into the area of morality (action). That is because it would not be wholly beneficial or practical to simply naval gaze for half a year around moral dilemmas. So, you will at times use the two terms (ethics and morality) interchangeably. In this way it is hoped you will avoid being like the man who knows what is right, but never gets around to doing it. In other words you will have *really* wrestled with *real* issues.

You can imagine that judgements about what is right and wrong hit at all points of the compass when you begin to consider the opinions of people who hold one of many worldviews that are manifest about us. But, what is pretty clear to all but the most extreme is that everyone is wired with a desire to know what is the right thing to do. Not only that, but people act on this concept everyday as they make decisions. Should I go over the speed limit even though I'm late for that appointment? Should I skip church today because I'm tired from a late night? Should I ask permission to hunt on Mr. Brown's land? Should I try to find the owner of the \$10 bill that I found in the mall just now?

Since the Fall man has struggled with the idea of ethical behaviour. Libraries could be filled with the books written on the topic. Wars have been fought over it. Nations have divided. Relationships have been broken. Churches have split. It's kind of fun to debate a friend over some abstract ethical exception but a serious grappling with one's own ideas of ethical

behaviour is where the rubber hits the road. It's easy to see that for Plato, Augustine, Calvin, Dewey, and even your local abortionist that decisions about ethics matters, but it should matter for you, too! As one scholar declared, "Ideas have consequences."

We need to act on what we know and behave in a way that is consistent with what we believe. To try to leave this part of our Great Ideas study in abstraction would be to make one out to be an egghead. No one wants to be labeled as one of those, now, do they?

In the end the decisions that you make concerning your own personal ethic will be based in part on what you have learned in your study of the ideas of God, Man, Truth, Goodness and Beauty. It has certainly been a long-range goal of this course that you will draw on that knowledge as you read the material associated with this last leg of your work, the selection of which is tiny indeed when compared to the epicloth of choice available. However, when considered as a whole, you ought to be well equipped to make the kind of ethical decisions with which you will be faced in the years ahead.

Eric Gill once said, "Take care of the truth and goodness, and beauty will look after itself." By extension it is safe to add, "...and with these a right relationship with both God and man becomes what our Creator has always intended it to be – a way of life." Amen! May it be so!

### 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 civilization 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 Aristotle's Ethics while not as much time as is suggested to study another book. 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

### Beauty and Ethics

How to Read a Book (2 weeks)  
The Bible (portions) (1 week)  
The Republic (portions) (2 weeks)  
Essay (1 week)  
Song of Roland (1 week)  
Till We Have Faces (1 week)  
Poetry Unit (1 week)  
Smith of Wooten Major (1 week)  
How Should We Then Live (3 weeks)  
Essay (1 week)  
Short Story Unit (1 week)  
The Odyssey (2 weeks)  
Aristotle's Ethics (2 weeks)  
The Merchant of Venice (1 week)  
Calvin's Institutes – Book IV (2 weeks)  
Essay (1 week)  
The Prince (1 week)  
Short Story Unit (1 week)  
WCF/LC/SC/HC (2 weeks)  
Farmer Giles of Ham (1 week)  
The Scarlet Letter (1 week)  
The Unaborted Socrates (1 week)  
Brave New World (1 week)  
Final Essay (1 week)  
Total - 32 weeks



### Study Guide for the Bible (Selected Books)

**Background:** The Bible is a book. Its author is God and its scribes are holy men who were directed by the Holy Spirit. That means that the Bible is like no other book ever written. It is the standard by which all other books, knowledge, and ideas are judged. The Bible is also a practical book and through it we learn everything that we need to know to live a holy life before God. If you were to read only one book in your life, this one would be it. Without it we would not know the mind of God and would remain utterly lost both now and for eternity.

You will be reading only portions of the Bible for your study this year. However, these selections will help you begin to explore what the Bible has to say about Beauty. Beauty for its own sake is not what the writers of the Bible were interested in but an appreciation of beauty is everywhere in the Scriptures. You will look at five general topics where the idea of Beauty is represented: The Beauty of God, The Beauty of Creation, Beautiful Words, Beautiful People, and The Beauty of Christ and His Bride (The Church). As you read, you will no doubt be confronted with many of the ideas that you studied over the past three years. Truth and Goodness and how this applies to the ideas of God and Man will shine through in these new passages that you will read. However, inherent in your reading should be a strong sensation of the deep, deep impact of the Beauty of God, His Creative and Providential working, and how men and women, too can be beautiful in all aspects of their being when they are right in their relationship with Him.

Send the completed study guide to us for evaluation upon completion.





## Study Guide for The Republic (Portions)

**Background:** Plato was born into a distinguished Athenian family in 427 BC. His father died when Plato was very young and, as was the custom of the day, his mother re-married, in this to another prominent man. All this is to say that Plato grew up extremely well connected on a number of fronts to those in power.

Like most Greek boys he received an education consisting of reading, writing, and the poets. His formative years also saw Athens struggle and eventually suffer defeat during The Peloponnesian War. The turmoil that ensued in the years following gave Plato a first hand experience with the many forms of government he later criticized in The Republic. This discontent came to a head when the powers of the day brought his beloved teacher, Socrates, to trial on trumped up charges of impiety (corruption the morals of young people). As you know already from your study of The Last days of Socrates, the philosopher, one of Western Cultures most influential thinkers, was found guilty and died of poisoning.

In large part this provided the impendance for Plato's founding of the Academy and his writing of the book that will study in part at this time. The Republic is actually mis-named in a sense. It is not about a particular form of government. It might better been named The Society. No matter...The Republic was written out of Plato's desire to spawn a truly just society based on the rule of a minority of enlightened philosophers.

How he proposed to accomplish this end is laid out in The Republic. A brief perusal of the table of contents will reveal key aspects necessary to the development of his theories. Ethics, education, philosophy, religion, politics, family, property, and art are just some of the main ideas presented. For our purposes we will deal with Plato's comments concerning art, poetry, and literature as they represent his view of beauty, but the text is probably better read within the context of our final idea for study – ethics and morality. Hopefully, you will some day return to a full reading of the book. Much of what Plato is saying here is quite relevant to our situation today.

In conclusion, Plato is a classical think that needs to be read. It is through him that we see into the mind of his mentor, Socrates, who, as far as we know, wrote nothing of his own ideas. It is also through him that we gain insight into his student, Aristotle, a philosopher we will study later this year. It is through all three of these men that we see their influence on such giants of the church as Augustine, Calvin, Aquinas, and even CS Lewis in our day. It is also through them that the Christian can gain flesh and blood understanding of the true, the good, and the beautiful. It is hoped that you will take away from The Republic a clearer picture of how better to engage your culture in all areas.

## Lesson One

Read the Translator’s Introduction.

This lesson will give you background information on Plato, the culture in which he lived, and some of the main ideas discussed in The Republic. Since we are not studying the entire book this year, this lesson will help you receive a general understanding of the work’s contents.

1. More than any other, who most influenced Plato’s thinking?

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2. Is it fair to say that Plato believed that a philosopher’s acquisition of learning or wisdom carried with it moral obligations? In other words, do ideas have consequences?

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3. What happened to seal Plato’s disillusionment with contemporary politics?

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4. What school did Plato found with the hope of training philosophers that one day might implement the ideas expressed in The Republic?

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5. What is the theme of The Republic?

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## MARKS FOR BEAUTY AND ETHICS

<i>Tree of Life School</i>			
<i>Beauty and Ethics</i>			
Assignment	Essay	Description	Mark
1		How to Read a Book	
2		The Bible (Portions)	
3		The Republic (Portions)	
	1	Essay on the Republic	
4		The Song of Roland	
5		Till We Have Faces	
6		Poetry Unit	
7		Smith of Wooten Major	
8		How Should We Then Live	
	2	Essay on How Should We Then Live	
9		Short Story Unit	
10		The Odyssey	
11		Aristotle's Ethics (Portions)	
12		The Merchant of Venice	
13		Calvin's Institutes IV	
	3	Essay on Calvin's Institutes	
14		The Prince	
15		Short Story Unit	
16		WCF/LC/SC/HC	
17		Farmer Giles of Ham	
18		The Scarlet Letter	
19		The Unaborted Socrates	
20		Brave New World	
	4	Final Essay for Beauty and Ethics	
		<b>Final Mark</b>	