

# The Inverted Spectrum

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Book Two of the Noumenal Realm Trilogy

*Level H Philosophy Curriculum*  
Guidebook

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# Noumenal Realm Trilogy

## Volume 2

# The Inverted Spectrum

The Noumenal Realm Trilogy is a set of three novels geared for middle school-age children. Although each novel stands alone, it is best to read them all, and in order. Readers do not need any prior training in philosophy to understand the trilogy. It is meant to be accessible and interesting to anyone who likes to think about deep questions. Readers familiar with the first six volumes of the Royal Fireworks philosophy curriculum will recognize a number of the philosophers and theories discussed, but the characters and the storyline are new.

The trilogy is a work of historical fiction that follows a handful of middle school students through a series of adventures with classic philosophers from the ancient and early modern periods. Its aim is to acquaint readers with the great minds that shaped Western civilization.

The trilogy as a whole focuses on the unconventional educational initiatives of an institution called the New Smithsonian Foundation, whose aim is to educate the children of America through virtual reality experiences instead of through the Smithsonian Institution's dusty museum artifacts. The Foundation selects Roslyn Hart, Jonah Ziv, and Brent Bentley, along with some other students, to participate in a program that teaches kids about the history of philosophy through virtual reality simulations. In *The Inverted Spectrum*, Jonah and Roslyn must solve the mysterious disappearance of philosopher John Locke in order to save Brent from a philosophical thought experiment gone awry. In the process, they learn about empiricism and its connection to the birth of democracy.

The storyline of this volume focuses on John Locke's famous thought experiment about a man who wakes up one morning to find that he perceives all the colors opposite of how he used to see them. This thought experiment shows that we can't know how others perceive the world. But what if other aspects of our consciousness could be inverted? The young heroes of this novel discover that consciousness is what gives human beings personal identity and a basis for political equality.

This companion book is called a "Guidebook" instead of a "Teacher Manual" in recognition of the fact that students at this level should be able to use it on their own. Of course, the story can be enjoyed without the Guidebook, but the Guidebook will help to bring home the philosophical content. It provides for each chapter a summary of the plot developments, a philosophical basis for the key concepts of the chapter, discussion questions, and suggestions for further exploration to extend the learning.

There are quotations from famous philosophers for each chapter. These quotations have been heavily edited for ease of reading and are not intended for scholarly reference. There is a list of sources at the end of this book for further reading.

# Chapter 1

## Summary

Jonah Ziv is flunking out of middle school due to problems with his sister and his addiction to video games. He must attend summer school at the New Smithsonian Foundation in Washington, D.C., in order to be allowed to continue to eighth grade.

## Philosophical Basis: Mortimer J. Adler and the Great Books

Philosophy is everybody's business.

That's a quote from Mortimer J. Adler, one of the most important American philosophers of the twentieth century. Adler wrote dozens of books that sold widely across the U.S. and beyond. His intent was to write philosophy in an accessible way so that anyone could read it and understand it. This is not surprising, since he believed that philosophy is everybody's business.

What may be surprising is that Adler dropped out of school when he was fourteen. He went to work at a newspaper, but he soon went back to school to take writing classes so he could be a journalist. It was in those classes that he discovered the work of Plato, Aristotle, René Descartes, and John Locke, and he knew then that he wanted to become a philosopher. He continued taking classes until he could get into Columbia University, where he eventually earned a Ph.D. in philosophy.

In an article titled "Why Philosophy Is Everybody's Business," Adler asked us to perform a thought experiment: What if all philosophy suddenly disappeared from the planet? Would it matter? Would you even notice? Adler thought you would. He wrote:

You would realize—would you not?—that even though you would still have science and history, you would not have any understanding of either science or history, since questions about history and science (other than questions of fact) are not historical or scientific but philosophical.

You would also realize that a great many of your opinions, and those of others, would have to go unquestioned, because to question them would be to philosophize.

You would not be able to ask questions about yourself and your life, questions about the world and your place in it, questions about what you should be doing and what you should be seeking—all questions that, in one form or another, you do, in fact, often ask and would find it difficult to stop asking.

A world without philosophy does not sound like a very nice place.

Everyone does philosophy, whether they realize it or not. But we don't always do it very well. Asking deep questions takes courage, and trying to answer them is often frustrating. It takes practice, support, and inspiration. For Adler, this meant reading what he called the "Great Books."

The great books are the most important and influential books throughout Western history. Examples include Plato's *Republic* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Many great thinkers, such as Thomas Jefferson, have recommended making a list of such books. Adler made one based on three criteria:



1. The book should be relevant to today.
2. The book should be rich enough to read over and over again.
3. The book should contain great ideas.

Adler's third criterion comes from Plato, who argued that every human being has the responsibility to progress along the Divided Line, from imagination to facts to concepts to ideas. Adler wrote:

Not to engage in the pursuit of ideas is to live like ants instead of like human beings.

Of course, the works of Plato—and all the great philosophers—are on Adler's list, but so are great works of history, science, poetry, and fiction.

The great books are not easy to read, but Adler maintained that they are worth the effort. He wrote:

If a book is easy and fits nicely into all your language conventions and thought forms, then you probably will not grow much from reading it. It may be entertaining, but not enlarging to your understanding. It's the hard books that count. Raking is easy, but all you get is leaves; digging is hard, but you might find diamonds.

Adler wrote a bestseller called *How to Read a Book* in which he recommended reading great books the same way you would read a love letter. Imagine you just got a love letter from the person of your dreams. How would you read it? You would read it carefully, looking for deeper meanings, questioning every possibility, and enjoying every word.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What do you think are the real reasons that Jonah is flunking out of school?
2. Jonah says that he started forgetting homework and skipping school because he's more interested in video games. To what extent do you think his parents are responsible for this? Explain.
3. Jonah doesn't like the kids at school because they're fake, and they talk about meaningless things just to try to impress one another. He likes video games instead. But video games are fake too; they are only made to look real. What do you suppose it is about video games that Jonah likes that is different from what he doesn't like about his classmates?
4. Jonah is annoyed by his teachers because they are "constantly telling us what's important for our future. As if they know." How much do you think teachers can truly tell you that is important for your future? Why do you think so?
5. Do you believe that Jonah is lonely? Why or why not?
6. Why do you think it's reassuring to Jonah to think that the world may be a video game?

### **For Further Exploration**

Learn more about Mortimer J. Adler's list of great books: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Books\\_of\\_the\\_Western\\_World](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Books_of_the_Western_World)