

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

July '20

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 1054

INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

Mortimer Adler

PART IV THE USE, MISUSE, AND NON-USE OF THE INTELLECT

CHAPTER FIFTEEN:
INTELLECTUAL VIRTUE AND VICE:
THE ORDER AND DISORDER OF THE PASSIONS

15

I trust readers remember an important difference between the intellect's powers and its habits. Its powers are to be found in all human beings regardless of the circumstances of time and place and regardless of the use they make of these powers. The difference between habits and powers is that some human beings have habits others do not possess, resulting from the fact that some repeatedly 'perform actions that others do not perform at all or perform infrequently. Since every virtue is a habit formed by repeated acts, some human beings have virtues not to be found in others.

In the preceding chapter, while discussing the conflict between the passions or emotions and the will, I had occasion to refer to moral virtue as a good habit of both the passions and the will, good because it resulted from behavior in which rational deliberation and decision controlled our voluntary conduct. It is also good because, the habit being thus formed, it disposes us to act habitually in that way. The habitual disposition to act under the dominant influence of the passions is moral vice.

In that context I mentioned courage, temperance, and justice as if they were three distinct moral virtues, existentially separate so that it is possible to have one of these virtues without having another. I must now correct that impression. Courage, temperance, and justice are three aspects of moral virtue, analytically distinguishable from one another but not existentially separable. We are either morally virtuous or not; but if we are, to whatever degree, we have those three aspects of moral virtue to that degree.*

*I have explained elsewhere the reason why there is not a plurality of existentially separate moral virtues, but only moral virtue with analytically distinct aspects that cannot exist in separation from one another.
See *Reforming Education* (1989), pp. 259-60.

The reason why I call attention to this point is that in this respect intellectual virtue differs from moral virtue. There are a number of distinct intellectual virtues that I shall enumerate presently. One can have one or more good intellectual habits without having all of them.

There is another respect in which moral and intellectual virtues differ. For every aspect of moral virtue, such as temperance, the person who lacks that aspect has in its place an aspect of moral vice. For example, the person who is *not* habitually temperate *is* habitually intemperate.

In addition, such intemperance takes one or another of two opposite forms. One is an excessive habitual indulgence in the pleasures of the flesh. The other is the opposite extreme of defect: abstinence or abstemiousness with regard to such pleasures. The virtuous habit with regard to sensual pleasures stands in the middle between the two extremes of excess and defect. It disposes the person having that habit to behave moderately, indulging in sensual pleasure neither too much nor too little.

In all of the foregoing respects, intellectual differs from moral virtue. There is a plurality of intellectual—virtues good habits in the use of the intellect. Intellectual virtue does not stand in the middle between the extreme of excess and the extreme of defect.

Before we attempt an enumeration of the various intellectual virtues, let us consider the variety of ways in which we can put our intellects to good use.

One good use that should be mentioned at the outset is the use of the intellect's reflexivity to know and understand our own intellectual nature, which involves understanding the minds of others as well.

Another good use of the intellect is to understand our sensitive powers and to know their limits and defects.

A third is using the intellect for purposes that the senses do not serve: distinguishing between knowledge and opinion, judging the claims that are made with respect to the truth and falsity of asser-

tions, and assessing the certitude or degree of probability that can be attached to assertions accepted as true.

Much of the knowledge that we attain is knowledge of reality—of the external physical world, of the social as well as the physical environment, and also of ourselves and other human beings. But these actual existences do not exhaust reality. Reality includes not only what actually exists now and what has actually existed in the past, but, also what may or may not exist in the future as well as what may never come into actual existence at all. It includes the realm of the possible as well as the realm of the actual. The intellect should be used to explore the realm of the possible—to know what possibilities there are and to understand them.

It almost goes without saying that the intellect should be used to communicate effectively, to engage in intelligent conversation about basic ideas and issues, and to solve problems, both theoretical and practical problems. Most of these things cannot be done at all by the use of our sensitive powers, or, if done at all, not without the cooperation of the intellect.

We should make good use of the intellect in its practical dimension by deliberating well about ends to be sought and means to be chosen, by making sound judgments about such matters, and reaching pragmatically good decisions about them, both in the sphere of *doing* (the private and public conduct of our lives) and in the sphere of *making* (the production of useful or beautiful things). In the latter respect, we should cultivate our intellectual imagination, for that is indispensable to all productive, or, as it is sometimes mis-called, creative activity.

In the theoretical or speculative dimensions of the intellect, we should make good use of it by reasoning cogently and validly, by being able to argue well in defense of our fundamental convictions and beliefs, to engage in debate with others without being contentious or disputatious, to detect our own mistakes as well as to discern and criticize the mistakes of others. In doing this, it is most important to detect contradictions, whether apparent or real, and to discover on which side of the contradiction the truth lies, recognizing that it must lie on one side or the other.

Finally, in the pursuit of truth, we should use our intellects to attain some grasp of what is most fundamental—first principles, both in the theoretic and the practical order of our understanding.

The intellect, and the mind of which it is the best part, is our most treasured human possession. Making good use of it is, therefore, indispensable to leading a morally good human life. Thinking well is prerequisite to living well. If, as I think is the case, we are under a moral obligation to try to make good lives for ourselves, and to enrich them by making the most of our innate potentialities, then making the best possible use of our intellects is essential to that effort.

The preceding enumeration of the ways in which the intellect should be put to good use prepares us for naming the intellectual virtues. If we could exhaustively name them, that would cover all the good uses just mentioned.

Aristotle tried to do this in the fourth century B.C. He named five intellectual virtues, three good habits of the speculative intellect, and two good habits of the intellect in its practical dimension.

The Greek words he used to name the three speculative virtues were *nous*, *epistemé*, *sophia*. Translated into English, they are understanding, knowledge, and speculative wisdom.

The Greek words Aristotle used for the two virtues of the practical intellect were *techne* and *phronesis*. The English equivalents here are art or skill and prudence or practical wisdom.

Aristotle's enumeration calls for some comment. Understanding involves insight concerning intelligible objects—the most important objects of thought, or basic ideas using that word in its objective sense. Knowledge includes all branches of learning—historical, scientific, mathematical, and philosophical knowledge, the latter in addition to the philosophical clarification of our understanding of basic ideas. Speculative wisdom can be attained only by carrying our philosophical thought as far as possible—to the knowledge and understanding of first principles. This may require us to go from natural philosophy to metaphysics and to the conclusions it reaches in philosophical theology.

Art is the name for any skill or technique. It includes all the useful, liberal, and fine arts, or arts of the beautiful. When the word “art” is commonly used (I would say misused) for works of fine art, it obviously does not name an intellectual virtue—a habit that is possessed by human beings who are rightfully called artists, craftsmen, or skilled workers.

Prudence, or practical wisdom, is the name for sound thinking about particular means to be chosen here and now. It involves taking counsel, engaging in rational deliberation, and reaching pragmatically sound judgments about what decisions should be made.

Prudence, or practical wisdom, is a sound use of the intellect for the sake of morally good conduct. It is, therefore, the one intellectual virtue that is an inseparable aspect of moral virtue. One cannot be morally virtuous without being prudent also, and one cannot be prudent unless one is morally virtuous. The means one prudently chooses must be means to the right end appointed by moral virtue. If the ends for such means chosen are themselves immoral, the skill employed in choosing them well is not prudence, but cunning, cleverness, or craft.*

*I must qualify something I said earlier. I said that, unlike the aspects of moral virtue, to each of which is attached two vices that are the extremes of excess and defect, the intellectual virtues do not have pairs of vices attached to them. This is true of all the intellectual virtues except prudence, which, because it is inseparable from moral virtue, does have a pair of vices attached to it. At one extreme is habitual rashness making decisions without the deliberation. At the other extreme is indecisiveness, which consists in being habitually unable to make decisions.

Thus understood, Aristotle's enumeration of the intellectual virtues would appear to be adequate. It is difficult to think of what more might be added. But the exhaustiveness of that enumeration is not what may be bothersome or troubling to twentieth century readers. Aristotle himself could be a specialist in almost all the empirical sciences of his day as well as a generalist in his philosophical thought.

In our age of intense specialization in all fields of science as well as in history and philosophy, that is impossible today for anyone. It may still be possible for one to be a generalist in one's philosophical understanding of history and in one's philosophical understanding of basic ideas and issues.

No one today can be a specialist in all fields of history, the whole range of mathematics, and in all the empirical sciences. No one can be a specialist in all the fine arts or all the useful arts. Only the liberal arts, which consist in a disciplined and skilled use of the intellect to read, write, speak, and listen well, should be in everyone's habitual possession.

A twentieth-century enumeration of the intellectual virtues, and one that is applicable to most human beings, not just the few who belong to an intellectual elite, is tantamount to saying what should

be the good intellectual habits that a generally educated person should have acquired in the course of a lifetime of learning, especially in one's later and more mature years.

The attained intellectual virtues of the generally educated person in our society and in our century would include, first of all, a habitual possession of the liberal arts—the skills of thinking and learning so indispensable to knowing and understanding. Among the intellectual virtues would be a habitual understanding of the great ideas and issues, and a generalist's understanding of mathematics, the natural world, human history, and human society, acquired by a philosophical approach to the subjects named and accompanied by some knowledge in these fields of learning.

Included also would be an understanding of human history, human nature, and human society through a thorough acquaintance with poetry, especially narrative and dramatic fiction. If possible for some, if not for all, the generally educated person might also be a well-trained specialist, in one or two of the productive arts, as well as in some phases of history, in one or another empirical science, and in one or another branch of mathematics.

So far, I have not mentioned the attainment of wisdom in the speculative dimension of the intellect and of sagacity in its practical dimension. In both dimensions, the opposite is folly, which, if persistent and habitual, must be regarded as an intellectual vice. What about ignorance and error, readers may ask; and also what about the defect that William James in a revealing essay called a "certain blindness in human beings"? All three of these are intellectual defects rather than vicious habits.

Of these three, ignorance, being a privation of knowledge, is more easily remedied than error that, if obdurately resistant to correction, proves to be an obstacle to learning.

The most serious of these defects is the intellectual blindness about which William James wrote. It is caused by strong intellectual prejudices that bar the reception of ideas contrary to the prejudices obstinately held. If irremediable, such blindness becomes an intellectual vice.

If a person suffers from the vice of folly and the vice of a closed mind, or intellectual blindness, the cause probably lies in what I regard as the most fundamental of all intellectual vices. That is the habitual tendency of a person to think emotionally—with his hips or his guts—instead of thinking rationally with his intellect.

Anyone who wishes to think rationally should have the habit of thinking coolly, with all affective feelings or sentiments and all emotions parked outside. The heat of the passions, especially if they are strong and violent bodily commotions, cannot help but cause a disturbance or even a distortion of all intellectual work.

William Wordsworth, in the preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, said that “poetry is emotion recollected in tranquility.” No statement could be more significant about the role of the emotions in the work of the intellect. Emotion has its place in poetry, as well as in music and the visual arts, but that place is in the past, to be remembered, not in the present while the artist is engaged in the production of a poem, a musical composition, or a work of visual art.

What Wordsworth said about poetry applies not only to music, painting, and sculpture but also to mathematical and philosophical thought, to scientific research and reflection, and to historical inquiry. The less emotions cloud and bemuse the intellectual processes involved in all these pursuits, the better the results are likely to be.

I might add that the same thing is true of the intellect’s involvement in political enterprises, especially with regard to international affairs, and also in business and industry. What Barbara Tuchman called “the march of folly” throughout history can be attributed mainly to the intellectual blindness that emotional prejudices cause.

Emotional thinking is, to use Freud’s phrase, “wishful thinking”—controlled by the drive of subjective desires and passions rather than by the objective realities to which dispassionate thinking should respond. Paradoxically, and obviously not recognized by him, Freud is caught in self-contradiction at this point.

If psychoanalytic theory claims that its hypotheses can be empirically verified or falsified by the data obtained by scientifically conducted, clinical research, then psychoanalytic theorizing is not wishful thinking. Yet Freudian psychology also claims that the passions control all human thinking, which is therefore wishful thinking throughout. Both claims cannot be true.

While thinking, to be done well, should be dispassionate in the sense of not being directed or controlled by emotions or other affects, it should also be passionate in the sense of enlisting emotional support for the conclusions reached.

One should have a passionate attachment to the conclusions of which one is convinced or persuaded, but emotions should not be involved in the ratiocinative process itself by which these conclusions have been reached. Nor should that passionate attachment cause one to be deaf to criticism and inhospitable to correction if the conclusions are not beyond the shadow of a doubt and so are open to challenge and question.

What I have just said about the conclusions of which we are convinced or persuaded is even more applicable to the assumptions, often hidden rather than acknowledged, with which we begin. It is here that an emotional investment in these assumptions is likely to prove an obstacle to an open examination of their truth or tenability. Nevertheless, from my long experience in teaching and lecturing, I know that the teacher or lecturer who does not express his convictions with passion or strong feeling is likely to be less effective than the one who does. It is in the expression of one's convictions, not in the thinking that produces them, that emotion can play a useful role.

Finally, I must return to a point made earlier when I said that moral virtue or strength of character is prerequisite to the acquirement of good intellectual habits. Here I must add that moral vice, or lack of a good moral character, is the cause of the intellectual defects and vices that we have considered.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN:
THE NEGLECT OF THE INTELLECT:
SLOTH

16

In the preceding chapter, I treated the use and misuse of the intellect. In this chapter, I propose to consider the disuse or nonuse of the intellect, for which the most appropriate name is sloth.

That English word is the translation of a Latin term in the Christian catalogue of mortal sins set forth by St. Gregory the Great. It also became the name for an almost completely dormant mammal that is usually found hanging by its claws on the branch of a tree. Because of this latter identification, sloth has in ordinary speech come to signify gross physical inactivity. In borrowing that term from both ordinary speech and from theological discourse, I have adopted it to designate an almost total neglect of the intellect or an inadequate use of it.

In the catalogue of mortal sins, sloth stands for spiritual lethargy or torpor. With their connotation of deep sleep, the words “lethargy” and “torpor” may be inappropriate for what I mean in using the word “sloth.” But what I have in mind is conveyed by emphasis on the spiritual, not physical, dimension of our conduct. It is the intellectual, not physical, inactivity of a person for which I am using the word “sloth.”

The ideal of intellectual virtue portrayed in the preceding chapter can be approximated in some degree by anyone who has the ability and willingness to make the effort. There are some human beings who, because of minimal or defective intellectual endowment, may not have the requisite ability. But there are a great many more who have sufficient ability to make the effort and fail to do so. It is those persons that I am charging with the fault of not using their intellects in the proper fashion.

Sloth is a moral fault, but unlike injustice that results in misconduct toward others, sloth is a moral fault that causes the misconduct of the individual’s private life. In this respect, it is more like the lack of temperance, which is abstinence from sensual pleasures or the lack of fortitude, which is a habitual unwillingness to take the pains involved in doing what one ought to do for the sake of leading a morally good life.

One ought to make good use of one’s intellect in order to lead a morally good life. Stated another way, one ought to lead an intellectual life. But many of us do not lead intellectual lives. Many of us are anti-intellectual. Many do not use their intellects beyond those uses they cannot avoid—its cooperation with the sensory powers in acts of perception, memory, and imagination.

If they go beyond such cooperative uses of the intellect, which confer conceptual illumination upon the things we perceive, remember, and imagine, they do not use their intellects for the purpose of increased knowledge and augmented understanding, sought for their own sake and not for some ulterior, practical purpose. They do not engage in the pursuit of truth for the love of it and for no other reason. They do not count the sheer delight of thinking well among the joys they prize and seek.

Those who do not lead intellectual lives deploy their intellectual powers in the work-a-day world of earning a living for the sake of getting ahead in that world. If they were not compelled to use their intellects for that purpose, they would not be inclined to do so.

When they are not immersed in the economic rat race, they resort to various forms of play and entertainment for the sake of recreation from the fatigues of toil or in order to kill the time that lies heavy on their hands. It never or seldom occurs to them to use free time for the exacting pursuits of leisure instead of for recreation or the pleasures of play.*

*I have in an earlier book discussed at length the difference between leisure-work and subsistence-work, one for the sake of personal improvement, the other solely for the sake of economic necessities. Both forms of work are quite distinct from all forms of play and amusement.

See *A Vision of the Future* (1984), chapter 2.

The pleasures of play are intensified by great skill in one's participation in whatever sports or games to which one is inclined. One has to use one's intellect to acquire such skill. But that use of the intellect, taken together with its use for economic or even political advancement, is hardly a sufficient use. While it is not total abstinence from intellectual activity, it is certainly an inadequate employment of whatever degree of intellectual power we have.

In sharp contrast, what I have called the exacting pursuits of leisure are all forms of intellectual activity in which the intellect is (1) used productively in making things that are useful and enjoyable, (2) used practically in making judgments about things to be done for the sake of a morally good life, and (3) used speculatively in the pursuit of truth and in all forms of learning for the sake of gaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.

These three uses of the intellect will, if they become habitual, confer upon a person the intellectual virtues that Aristotle named in Greek antiquity—art and prudence, understanding, knowledge, and wisdom.

On the part of those who have sufficient intellectual ability to do so, sloth is either a habitual reluctance to employ one's intellectual power adequately, or it consists in almost total abstinence from an active engagement of the intellect in pursuits of leisure.

Anti-intellectualism gives rise to the most extreme, the most morally deplorable, form of sloth. It is to be found in persons for whom the ultimate objectives in life are the maximization of pleasure, money, fame, or power and who, thus motivated, express their contempt for those who waste their lives in purely intellectual pursuits. It is almost as if they wished they did not have the burden of having intellects that might distract them from their fanatical devotion to nonintellectual aims.

It is man's glory to be the only intellectual animal on earth. That imposes upon human beings the moral obligation to lead intellectual lives. The slothful are blind to the glory and neglectful of the obligation.

EPILOGUE:
THE MESSAGE OF THIS BOOK

Years ago, when, at the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins and I led great books seminars for undergraduates, President Hutchins would frequently open the discussion with the question: "What is this book's central message?"

That is a question readers may be asking after finishing this book. The answer, briefly stated, is (1) that the human mind, unlike the mind of other animals, has intellectual powers; (2) that it is by virtue of these powers that human beings differ radically in kind, not just in degree, from other animals; and (3) that although these intellectual powers cooperate with man's sensitive powers, they differ from the sensitive powers by not being embodied in the brain and sense organs, but are immaterial powers.

It is the last of these three points that, for many readers, may be most open to doubt. I would therefore like to take this occasion to admit that they have good reason to be in doubt.

In view of the research now going on in the field of artificial intelligence, I am compelled to agree that, sometime in the future, it may be found conclusively that the action of the human brain is not only a necessary condition of our intellectual activity but also its sufficient condition.

If that turns out to be the case, it may dispel all the mysteries about mind except, perhaps, consciousness itself. It is certainly expected to explain, in purely physical or material terms, the human mind's power of conceptual thought and all its other intellectual processes.

The dilemma such doubt requires readers to face is a strong disjunction—an either/or with no middle ground. *Either* the intellect is an immaterial power or its action, while analytically distinct from that of the brain, is existentially inseparable from it.

Many serious consequences follow from ultimately finding the truth on one or the other side of this dilemma. If, except for the conscious experience that accompanies brain action, all the rest of the mind's activity can be adequately explained in the future by

neurophysiology, then man's intellectual power may simply be a higher degree of the intelligence we share with the other animals. We would then also be incorrect in attributing to the human mind two quite different sets of powers: intellectual and sensitive.

I have not yet mentioned in this book what I regard as the most serious consequences of concluding in the future, on the basis of scientific research, that it is a philosophical error to think of the intellect as an immaterial power. Others may not share my view of this matter. They may be irreligious persons who look upon religion as "the poetry in which we believe," to use George Santayana's phrase. They may look upon the stories in the Old and the New Testament as fables, myths of the same kind that are to be found in cultures other than that of the Judeo-Christian West.

To them, it will not come as a shock that denying the immateriality of the intellect deprives two dogmas in Jewish and Christian orthodoxy of any philosophical support. Stated another way, two dogmas of Jewish and Christian faith are called into question by the denial of the intellect's immateriality. One is the immortality of the human soul. The other is the divinity that resides in man, but not in other animals, because human nature has a trace of spirituality in it that explains what is meant by the saying that in man and man alone is to be found the image of God.

Articles of faith are totally beyond proof. A conclusion that can be proved is not and cannot be an article of faith except for those unable to understand the proof. But philosophical arguments and reasoning can be used to make articles of faith intelligible or to lend them rational support that falls short of proof.*

*Articles of religious faith cannot be proved, but they are subject to philosophical or scientific disproof. On this point see my book *The Plurality of Religions and the Unity of Truth*, to be published in October 1990.

Thus, for example, attempts to prove the existence of God, if successful, do not prove the Jewish or Christian faith in God's existence. A sound philosophical proof of God's existence is at best only a preamble to the Jewish or Christian religious belief in God's existence.*

*See *How to Think About God* (1980), especially Parts I and VI.

Philosophical argument is much less adequate with respect to religious faith in immortality than it is with respect to religious faith in God's existence. There is no philosophical argument that proves the immortality of the soul as, in my judgment, there is a sound philosophical argument for the existence of God. But there are


sound philosophical arguments for the immateriality of the human intellect. If that conclusion is philosophically true, it at least establishes the possibility, not the actuality, of immortality for human souls.

If, on the contrary, we are in the future compelled to conclude that the human mind is as completely embodied in physical or material organs as are the minds of other animals, then the immortality of the human soul is as impossible as is immortality for the souls of other animals and the souls of plants and vegetables.*

*I am using the word “soul” here in its Aristotelian, not its Platonic, sense—not as signifying a spiritual substance that inhabits the body but as that which, in all living organisms, confers life upon them and all the vital powers they possess. The soul is not in the body as a rower in a rowboat, able to swim away when the rowboat sinks, but rather as form is in matter (i.e., as the die is in the wax).

Many readers may attribute a spirituality to human beings that they do not attribute to other animals. They should realize that the only metaphysical significance they can attach to the word “spirituality” is a negative connotation, that of immateriality. If in the future we are compelled to adopt a completely materialistic view of human nature, we should then discard the word “spirituality” from our vocabularies, at least in the metaphysical sense of that word.

If those same readers are also religious Jews or Christians, they should also be shocked to discover that they can no longer proclaim, in the words of Genesis, 1, that man is made in the image of God. For whatever else they may think about God, religious Jews and Christians believe that God is a purely spiritual being. The slender trace of spirituality in man that resides in the immateriality of the human intellect is the only basis for understanding man as made in the image or likeness of God.

Religious Jews and Christians may not then abandon their respective religions, but, in my judgment, the character of those religions will be radically altered. The adoption of a completely materialistic explanation of all natural phenomena, or everything that exists in nature, may not lead to disbelief in God, but it would result in serious changes in the Jewish or Christian beliefs that remain, certainly with respect to man’s relation to God and with respect to human destiny, beyond this life and this world. 

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Elaine Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Phone: 312-943-1076

Mobile: 312-280-1011

David S. Peterson, Managing Director

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.