

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Sep '20 *Philosophy is Everybody's Business* N° 1060



MR. ADLER AND TEACHING

When to read a book remains a question, even when you know how.

Anton C. Pegis

When to the qualities of seriousness and frankness Mr. Adler adds the further candor of public confession, he invites both those who agree and those who disagree with him to speak with equal frankness and candor. I should like to discuss a number of problems that Mr. Adler raised in his two recent articles in THE COMMONWEAL (April 5, 26).

In the last analysis, the whole problem is concerned with the principles and premises involved in the decisions that he has made on the nature of teaching, and especially the teaching of philosophy. I venture to think that a more direct treatment of these principles would have a marked effect on his decisions. More specifically, if Mr. Adler had considered the speculative relationship which must exist as between teacher and taught towards the subject of study *before* learning itself is possible, he would have found the question of docility and truth considerably more complex than he has indicated. He would have placed a much greater philosophical significance on the history of philosophy than he has done. He would therefore have considered the speculative whole within which, and only within which, great books of all ages minister to the development of the human intellect. And consequently, he would have considered more objectively the question of the philosophical interpretation of the history of philosophy; with the result that he would have been less ready to make the specific charges of historicism that he has made.

On this last point I do not wish to be misunderstood. It may very well be that some of Professor Gilson's disciples are guilty of historicism, even as many contemporary teachers of philosophy are guilty of the same error. But I think that at least part of Mr. Adler's charge arises from a misconception of what an historical approach to the study of philosophy involves, of the limitations that it imposes on itself, and of the services it can render and the relations it has to the study of philosophy itself.

Yet so long as one is content to study, for reasons best known to himself, the philosophical doctrine of thinkers of different centuries, their affinities and their influences, without pretending that such work is philosophy, it may be asked how the error of historicism is committed. It may even be, and this is a point that Mr. Adler has scarcely considered, that such a student conceives that the needs of philosophy at the present moment dictate this apprenticeship. For one may be convinced that the problem for us today is, not whether one shall be a philosopher, but what a philosopher is, and when a man is a philosopher, by practicing the Thomistic maxim of studying what men have thought in order to go on to discover the truth. One may even urge that in an age of cultural darkness such as our own, we must rediscover a conception of the human reason that is not the victim of the skeptical and scientific positivism of Mr. Dewey, of the anti-rational theologism of original and traditional Protestant thought, of the apologeticism that has infected not a few Catholic educators, and, to go back into history for a moment, of the nominalistic nakedness which has weakened

the human reason ever since the end of the Middle Ages and which permeates the modern world as a basic creed.

Origins of learning and teaching

When, in his first article, Mr. Adler refers, some three different times, to "the natural light of our own reason," I think he resolves the question of philosophical truth much too easily. Not all known truths are *learned* truths, even though they are all acquired truths; and therefore, not all truth known by the human intellect are *taught* truths. I wish to argue therefore that docility and instruction in philosophy belong *only* to the order of conclusions discovered or taught and that it is not correct to say, *without further qualification*, that the natural reason is capable of recognizing conclusions *as true*. If I am not mistaken, the whole question of docility, as applied to the speculative sciences, reduces itself to recognizing that before the human intellect can learn new conclusions by demonstration, whether it be through personal discovery or through teaching, it must be recognized as already possessing a knowledge of principles and premises enabling it to be a subject capable of further knowledge. The human intellect is not at the same distance from all truths, and the realm of truth is not a sort of flatland to be investigated atomically, proposition by proposition. It is rather a hierarchy in which *a precognition* (to use a technical term) of principles is the condition of the cognition of conclusions as true.

The doctrine of precognition, having a long history, can raise in many minds all sorts of conceptions. It may be thought that what I am proposing here is the old Platonic doctrine of reminiscence, or possibly the famous Augustinian doctrine of God as the interior teacher—and the only teacher—of the human soul. And those who have a flair for more fantastic and abstruse speculation may possibly accuse me of proposing an Arabian doctrine of infused ideas in order to explain the origin of human knowledge. It would be easy to show, however, that such is not the case, and anyone who wishes to verify what I am saying has only to read Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*, Saint Thomas's commentary on this same work, his commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius, his *Summa Theologica* (I, q.117) and especially the *De Veritate* (q.XI) . Yet I should be naive to suppose that ideas which, in different ways, could captivate the minds of a Plato, an Augustine or an Avicenna did not contain some fundamental truth, or that, in reforming them, Saint Thomas Aquinas did not give full philosophical expression to their visions at the very moment of correcting them. I should like to insist on this point because the question of philosophical error is very often handled too cavalierly, just as all too often truth and error are

sorted out like sheep and goats. I am less concerned, therefore, in the present in-stance to urge that the doctrine of precognition is Thomistic than to urge that the whole of the Augustinian doctrine, for example, is *partly* right. On essential points philosophers do not make many errors. What happens rather is that, like a drop of ink in water, a single error can color their entire horizon. Usually this happens at the very beginning of their thinking, at that first meeting between the intellect and reality where most philosophical battles are won or lost or compromised. Consequently, I think that philosophers have much more in common than they sometimes suppose and than Mr. Adler imagines.

I have said that all human knowledge is acquired, but not all is acquired by learning or teaching. The knowledge of first principles is acquired knowledge, but it is not acquired by learning. It is known rather *naturally*. Between *natural* acquired knowledge and *learned* acquired knowledge there is this difference, that the first is immediate while the second is mediated and by development from prior knowledge. In other words, the whole within which the ideas of docility and authority, learning and teaching, as understood by Mr. Adler, have a meaning, requires us to hold that learning enters the life of the human intellect at a *derivative moment* in its acquisition of knowledge. That derivative moment marks, *in its presuppositions*, wherein teacher and taught can and must communicate with one another as equals; and it marks, in its *derivative* character, wherein they can enjoy the relations of teacher and taught as, *relatively*, equals.

It will not be contested that only those who know can teach. But it should equally not be contested that only those who know can learn. For in the speculative sciences learning is not a process of going from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge, but rather a process of going by inference from truths already known to conclusions formerly known only implicitly and at the end known explicitly and in themselves. In such communication student and teacher must be conceived as equals. If they are unequal from this moment on, it is only in the sense that the teacher possesses actually and explicitly a knowledge of the conclusions that can be drawn from the science to be studied, whereas the student possesses a knowledge of these same conclusions only virtually and implicitly. In an ultimate sense, both teacher and student communicate in the natural knowledge which both possess in virtue of being intelligent beings. In a more proximate sense, it is the pre-cognition of principles and premises which enables the intellect of one who is learning, through discovery or instruction, to arrive at a knowledge of conclusions and to rest in the truth of these conclusions when

known. Only through precognition, then, can the human intellect arrive at a knowledge of conclusions *as true*.

Now it is unquestionably true that truth alone has authority over the human mind and that consequently a teacher has authority in relation to teachable matters, to the extent that he is able to speak the truth. But the problem of the docility of the student with respect to a teacher as well as the problem of the authority of the teacher with reference to the subject which he is teaching, is bound to remain an ambiguous one so long as we do not recognize that truth and knowledge do not belong to all subjects in the same way, that there-fore men do not possess authority with respect to various subject matters in the same way, and, what is most important, that the intellect of the student or the teacher is not related to the different truths of a given speculative science with the same immediacy. In other words, Mr. Adler's discussion of docility requires two clarifications. Since the question of truth and knowledge is not the same in all the sciences, Mr. Adler may be accused of basing his discussion of docility too much on the pattern of the demonstrative sciences. Thus, the authority of the teacher and the docility of the student are not of the same kind in grammar, history and physics as they are in a demonstrative science such as geometry.

Then again, because learning has its roots in precognition, it is necessary to notice the intelligible order and hierarchy within which the acquisition of knowledge by learning is possible and within which the teacher-student relationship **in** the speculative sciences obtains. This means that in such sciences a teacher or a book can teach the human intellect only in the way in which that intellect is, in fact, teachable. Hence, the question of docility, like the question of instruction, is a relevant and understandable question only after we recognize that there are truths which the intellect must preknow. It is not a book, but the principles of a science, within which a student and a teacher can be related to one another; and if it be held that we learn from books, it is only within the perspective of principles already known to be true that books or living teachers can teach us.

The curriculum of great books

The question may then be asked, whether a university curriculum which organizes a liberal arts program of study on the basis of great books, without explicit recognition of that which the acquisition of knowledge by learning presupposes, is not ignoring the very conditions which make the teaching of demonstrative truths possible. I am far from contending, as some critics of St. John's

have contended, that the student should not read books in which there are philosophical or other errors. I think it is notorious that, under the guise of protecting students from error, we turn them out of college abysmally ignorant. I fully agree, therefore, that it is one of the functions of a college, and I should insist that this applies in particular to a Catholic college, to introduce students to erroneous and otherwise dangerous books under the guidance of competent teachers. It is folly to suppose that virtue can be based on ignorance or that a student who has not read something of the outstanding philosophers from Descartes to Whitehead, for example, is not courting intellectual disaster when he discovers, like a bewildered novice, the history of human error.

But the real question does not lie here. For granted that great books are a necessary and indispensable means in a liberal education, the question that arises is how these books are to be related to the logical succession of demands of the human intellect in its pursuit of truth within each speculative science—demands imposed both on teacher and on student if truth is to be taught.

Now Mr. Adler has pointed out in his second article that the St. John's program, if rightly understood, does not result inevitably in eclecticism or even sophistry and skepticism. He insists that "the objective is to know the truth about God, man and nature, and the ends of human life, and not what anyone, however great his authority, thought about these matters." There can be no quarrel about such an aim, but there is surely room for question about the execution of this program. And especially there is room for question when we consider some of Mr. Adler's decisions on historical matters. For, unless it is a purely dialectical game in which no question of truth can be raised at all, Mr. Adler's theory of teaching requires as a basis the doctrine of precognition that I have already outlined. But such a doctrine carries with it a whole metaphysics of the human intellect and of the order of its perfectibility in knowledge. It is neither in logic nor in ethics that we shall find a principle which can free the St. John's plan of the charge of eclecticism and historicism. It is in metaphysics and in a meta-physical appreciation of the nature and educability of the human intellect that any teaching of speculative truth must be grounded.

It is hereabouts that the position of Mr. Adler is open to discussion. For if one holds such a metaphysical view of the educability of the human intellect, one ought to recognize also a relation of precognitive communication among men in history and through the contingencies of history. Yet Mr. Adler does not think so. In fact, on the

relations between philosophy and the history of philosophy he expresses himself in the following surprising way:

No matter how perfectly all the historical techniques are employed, it is impossible to *know with certitude* what Aristotle or Plotinus thought about anything. In contrast, the philosophical thought of Aristotle and Plotinus is either certainly true or certainly false. It is either knowledge or not knowledge, but never probable opinion.

His reason for such a singular contention is that, in what he calls cultural history, we undertake to come to a decision about "the singular mind of a particular man in terms of such contingent and inadequate data as written documents." I assume that his point about Aristotle and Plotinus bears on the distinction between their thought considered uniquely *as theirs* and their thought considered absolutely as true or false, as well as between the function of exegesis with respect to their texts and the function of critical judgment. Mr. Adler asks us to believe that the philosophical activity of man in any age is so embedded in the culture of that age that anyone who undertakes to understand it in that culture can never experience it as philosophical truth.

Two questions must be answered at this point. The first is, exactly how does Mr. Adler propose to learn *from* great books if he has no understanding of a man's ideas in their intelligible order and hence in the necessity of their intellectual movement?


Are we not in the presence of a peculiar kind of fact in the history of culture when we study the history of philosophy? And does not the peculiarity of this fact consist at least in this, that it cannot be known *for whatever purposes* without also being experienced in the intelligibility which makes it a philosophical truth? I must contend therefore that Mr. Adler's interpretation of history is not true to the kind of cultural fact that he is studying, namely, philosophy, and that consequently the appeal to the contingencies of history and the individuality of philosophers is untrue to the philosophical facts themselves; for no contingency in the world can ever remove from the work of a philosopher the necessity which the truth of reality imposes upon his intelligence.

I should acknowledge gladly at this point that I am making an assumption. I can put that assumption in the form of the second question that Mr. Adler has to answer. I am assuming that, while there have been many philosophers in the history of philosophy, there is

only one philosophy. I cite the following passage from Professor Gilson not as authority, but as truth:

All that which, in the history of philosophy, can be traced back to non-philosophical causes is itself irrelevant to philosophy itself . . . there is but one way for philosophy to last, which is for it to be true. There is no other philosophy than perennial philosophy, which always lasts and will always survive the countless failures of its surrogates. . . Thus, philosophy is always there, a standing truth to those who have once recognized its nature, a standing failure to those who mistake it for what it is not (*Mediaeval Studies, Vol. I, 1939, pp. 8, 10*).

If such be the case, and I accept it fully, there must be a community among philosophers which reflects this necessary and necessitating character of philosophical truth. There is no historical contingency which can eliminate such a necessity, not even error, for it is the same perennial philosophy which explains the efforts and measures the errors of those who fail. Under such conditions, I can understand the function of great books and how it is natural for us to express sincere gratitude to our teachers in such a fellowship in truth.

But what I cannot understand is how one who accepts what Mr. Adler himself has called the timelessness of truth can empty history of philosophical truth. Nor is it easy to understand how anyone who lives in time and is surrounded by the contingencies of history, having emptied the historical order of any share in the necessity of truth, can accept *at any time* a participation in it through philosophical activity. I think that Mr. Adler's difficulties come to a head at this point, for neither is the past a dead ruin nor is the present a time-less paradise. We must neither immobilize time in order to have philosophy, nor sanctify contingency in order to have history. Neither is the philosophical past contingent, nor is the philosophical present immobile. Mr. Adler must reconcile isolated extremes: a too relativistic view of history and a too unhistorical view of philosophy. That which will make such a reconciliation possible, as well as give point and substance to his defense of the St. John's plan, is the Thomistic doctrine of precognition. When Mr. Adler admits that such a doctrine is at the basis of his theory of teaching, he may find it necessary to revise some of his judgments on history. But, however this may be, *he* will then be proposing to Catholic educators a basis of discussion that is genuinely their own. 

* Published in The Commonweal XXIX, March 17, 1939, pp. 581-583.

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.