

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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A CONVERSATION WITH MORTIMER ADLER

An interview by **Bill Moyers**

Transcript of the 15 February 1976
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(Part 1 of 2)

BILL MOYERS: His name is Mortimer Adler. He was born in 1902, not too late to sit at the feet of Plato, Socrates and John Stuart Mill. Ever since he was a teenager, he's been making people think, and often angry. In the next hour you'll see why.

MOYERS: Philosopher, educator, author, editor. Mortimer Adler has been known to incite intellectual riot among non-consenting

adults. He's a mind-loper, a philosophical provocateur, as much at home with Marx as most of us are with Walter Cronkite.

MORTIMER ADLER: By property we do not mean in this discussion the shirt on your back, which is your property, it's your private property. You can't wear it and anybody else can't wear it at the same time. It's yours on your back and the shoes on your feet, the car you drive, the food you eat, that's private property and no one can abolish it. It can't be abolished.

When Marx talks about private property, he means that's short for private ownership of the means of production, the private ownership of capital, and only that. Property means capital; and private property means the private ownership of capital. That's the only sense in which he's using the term and the only sense in which we should use the term as we discuss this.

MOYERS: He has written widely on philosophy, politics, economics, law and morals. Many years ago he helped to inspire the Great Books Program for Liberal Colleges and Adult Education. And his first love remains the teaching of adults.

To his seminars at the Aspen Institute in Colorado come business executives, scholars, judges, journalists, and untitled citizens whose credentials are an open and sometimes a bemused mind.

ADLER: There's a powerful rhetorical ... this is an address, YOU, pointing his finger at the bourgeois capitalist, you are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population. Its existence for the few is solely due to its nonexistence in the hands of those nine-tenths. You approach us, therefore, with intending to do away with a form of property, the necessary condition for whose existence is the nonexistence of any property for the immense majority of the society. In a word you approach us with intending to do away with your property. Precisely so. That is just what we intend. Now if you remember the word property here, what he's saying is in this paragraph the trouble is not that there is a private ownership of property, of the means of production, but that it's concentrated, highly concentrated, in one-tenth of the population. Nine-tenths have no ownership in the means of production. And that's the cause of the trouble. Now, if that's the cause of the trouble, the remedy is not the abolition of the private ownership, but the very opposite—the diffusion of it.

MOYERS: His critics say he's an imperial dogmatist, ruling these sessions and dominating his peers—if he has peers—with the presumption of authority that borders on intellectual tyranny. The criticism seems to roll right off. He's heard it all his life. "I'm not trying to be popular," Mortimer Adler says, "I'm only trying to make you think."

MAN: Mr. Adler, I have been an exponent for internal matters and I want to bring this up again and get your reaction...

ADLER: Internal? Domestic or what?

MAN: Internal ... inside.

ADLER: I see. I see.

MAN: In terms of Marx and he doesn't skip the issue, although he throws it right in the garbage can, as far as I'm concerned. May I read please, quotes ...

ADLER: What page?

MAN: One forty-four, second column ... second ... first full paragraph ... he's in quotes, I suppose, making a mock-up, undoubtedly, when he said... "Religion, moral, philosophical and judicial ideas have been modified in the course of historical development, but religion, morality, philosophy, political science and law constantly survive this change." He's making fun of that.

ADLER: Yeah. The arts, philosophy, religion, have their roots in the economy. In other words the kind of art you get, the kind of philosophy you get, are the slave...what he is saying is: when you read Aristotle, that isn't philosophy pure and simple, that's the philosophy of a slave-owning society. You read St. Thomas Aquinas, that's not philosophy pure of theology. That's the religion and theology of a feudal society. And he's saying all the cultural epiphenomena, all the cultural superficial things, are based on economic modes of production. That's what he's saying.

MAN: Well, I don't believe that.

ADLER: I didn't say...that's what he's saying.

MAN: But I mean to say, if an eternal truth is an eternal truth, doesn't it belong to mankind...

ADLER: He's saying there are no eternal truths. Obviously, Marx is saying there are no eternal truths.

MAN: Well, he's wrong.

ADLER: Mr. Dufallo, at this time in the morning? Privately, yes.

MOYERS: Mortimer Adler taught at Columbia University from 1923 to 1929 and then joined Robert Hutchins at the University of Chicago, where he was for many years, Professor of the Philosophy of Law. There were, together, the most controversial pair in higher education. In 1952, Adler founded the Institute of Philosophical Research to explore and analyze the basic ideas and issues in the thought of the Western World.

You've been for 25 years taking the great ideas, as you call them, and mixing them into the lives of business executives, and housewives, and others. Why? Why so much of your career spent in that particular limited form?



ADLER: I'll tell you why. Because I firmly believe that learning in adult life is the most important learning there is. I think what children, and I regard anyone in school as a child, even when he's at the University level, any institutionalized person, as immature and a child. I think the learning of the immature is very insufficient for a life. The most you can learn in school is very little. The learning that comes after school, after you've matured, after you've been out and gone through the world of hard knocks and had all

the grieving and difficult experiences of the adult human being, you're much more capable of understanding what's to be understood.

For example, I have read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* with children in college and I have read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* with adults. The difference is day and night. The children can't understand *War and Peace*. They can't understand the love of Pierre and Natasha. They just can't understand it.

MOYERS: Wouldn't the consequence of this be some very radical changes in the structure of education in our country and the timing of education in our country?

ADLER: It's the most radical change proposed: that a liberal education be completed in 12 years and the people be given the Bachelor of Arts degree at 16 and after that, no one be in school between 16 and 20. I want compulsory non-schooling; I want them to start at four. Twelve years to 16. And at 16 everyone out of school. No one allowed to come back to school until 20 and then only by selective examinations. Everyone admitted; free admissions up to a Bachelor of Arts degree. Highly selective admissions for the University, for the advanced degree. And then, everyone...somehow everyone taken into adult learning in one form or another.

MOYERS: I've always been interested in how you got interested in philosophy.

ADLER: Well, it was in a sense an accident. I was taking a course at Columbia University. I was working on the *New York Sun* and to improve myself in certain respects I was taking a course in the Extension Division at night in Victorian Literature. One of the books assigned to be read was John Stuart Mill's autobiography. And there I learned to my great surprise and chagrin that John Stuart Mill at the age of five had read the dialogues of Plato in Greek and could distinguish between Socratic method and the substance of the

Platonic philosophy. And here I was 15 years old and never heard of Plato before, and never read any dialogues of Plato. So, I went out and bought a pirated edition of the *Dialogues of Plato* for four dollars, I think it was. And I started to read the Dialogues. And I was so fascinated by Socrates, by the actual intellectual process going on, that I started to play Socrates with my friends. And I went around and button-holed and interrogated them. And that's

how I got into it. I decided that I didn't want to be a journalist any longer. I wanted to be a philosopher and I went to college.

MOYERS: Did your friends resent you?

ADLER: They resented Socrates; they resented me. Surely. It's a very nasty process, questioning people the way Socrates did. That's why they gave him the hemlock as a matter of fact.

MOYERS: There's a story that you used to write letters to Professor Dewey at Columbia challenging his educational theories. Are they true?

ADLER: Yes. In fact he spoke ... he lectured very slowly, haltingly. So that I could take his ... almost the entire lecture down in long-hand. And I would go home and then sit down and type it out. And as I typed it out, I recognized there were some inconsistencies in it. Or that what he said today didn't quite cohere, hang together, with what he said a week or two days ago. So, I'd write a letter, "Dear Dr. Dewey: According to my notes, a week ago you said... But today you said... How do you put these things together please?"

And he'd come to class and say, "A member of this class has written me a letter," and he'd read the letter out loud, and answer it. I'd write the answer down and then I'd find that the answer was inconsistent with something else. So, he put up with this for about three weeks, and then of course ... I was unrelenting. I kept on writing the letters. He finally called me in his office and he said, "Would you please stop?"

MOYERS: Did you?

ADLER: Yes, I did.

MOYERS: And you were how old?

ADLER: I was then 17.

MOYERS: And you were challenging John Dewey?

ADLER: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed. In fact I had one other teacher that you may have heard of at Columbia, Erwin Edmond, who asked me not to come to class because I got too excited.

MOYERS: Your resume doesn't include a high school diploma or a Bachelor of Arts.

ADLER: I left high school at the end of the second year. I left ... I was thrown out of high school. I had told the principal a huge lie and he caught me in it. I was the editor of the high school paper and he had asked me to do something which I didn't do and then lied my way out. So, I left high school and went to work on the *New York Sun*. And then, under the influence of Plato, managed to get enough credits together by studying on my own to go to college; and entered Columbia in my sophomore year, my second year. Finished Columbia in three years but didn't get the degree, partly because I couldn't swim. I just didn't want to swim.

MOYERS: Couldn't swim?

ADLER: No.

MOYERS: What did it have to do with the degree?

ADLER: At Columbia, in order to get a Bachelor of Arts degree you had to swim the pool two lengths on your face down and one length on your back and dive from the high tower. But that wasn't the only reason I didn't get a degree. I didn't go to gym. And physical education was ... four years of physical education was required at Columbia. And I didn't go to gym because I thought it was a terrible nuisance to have to dress in the morning at home, go to class, undress and go to ... go to gym and undress, put on gym clothes, run around the track or something like that, then dress again. That seemed to me to be a terrible demand. I cut gym for four years. So, when my final records came up, I didn't have the qualifying courses to graduate.

MOYERS: Has Columbia ever shown any penitence over denying you the degree?

ADLER: Not really, no. But, you know, one doesn't have to have a Bachelor of Arts degree to get a PhD and I went on and did graduate work. In fact without a Bachelor of Arts degree I finished my undergraduate work in June of 1923 and started to teach at Columbia in September of 1923.

MOYERS: There are two other stories I've always wanted to have confirmed or have denied. One is that you used to drop live boa constrictors on the shoulders of people to test their reactions.

ADLER: Yes, the story is in general accurate, but in detail not. I was doing ... this was at a time when I was doing some work for my PhD in Psychology. And I was studying the emotions, the physiological reactions, all the physiological changes that took place during really violent emotions—pupillary changes, changes in blood pressure, psychogalvanic reactions, changes in breathing and heartbeat.

So, I had these students who volunteered to be subjects for the experiment, in a dark room chained to all the apparatus with their eyes against two little holes through which I looked ... I could look at their pupils, you see, right at the pupils as they contract. And I had a colleague who either shot a revolver off behind their heads or dropped or coiled a boa constrictor around their necks. And another occasion I would look under the table with a flashlight and kick them in the shins to get them angry. And we got all kinds of...the only thing we couldn't get was sex and hunger. It's impossible to get sex and hunger in the laboratory while people are chained.

MOYERS: Even Masters and Johnson didn't use that technique. The other story says that once you met Gertrude Stein and you were engaged in a conversation with her and finally she hit you over the head two or three times and said, "Adler, you're obviously..."

ADLER: "I'm not going to argue with you. You're the kind of man that always wins arguments." That was an extraordinary evening. She was there with Alice B. Toklas at Bob Hutchins' house for dinner. And this conversation went on and got more and more heated. And finally, about 10 or 10:30 the butler came in and said,

"The police are here." And Gertrude Stein held her hand up and said, "Have them wait."

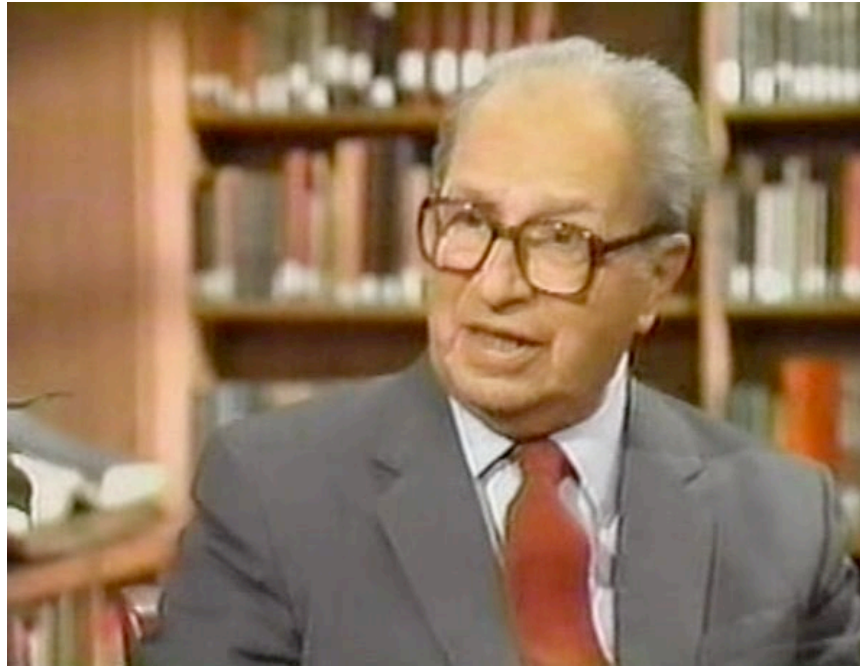
Two police captains came because Gertrude Stein wanted to see Chicago in a squad car at night and it had been arranged by one of the trustees at the University.

So everyone got up to leave and I was standing there shaking hands and I stood next to Alice B. Toklas and she said to me, "This

has been a most wonderful evening. Gertrude has said things to-night it will take her 10 years to understand.”

MOYERS: Did you ever get a feeling that your friends and others as well just were uneasy by the presence of a philosopher in their midst?

ADLER: Particularly, if the philosopher is in the Socratic habit of asking questions or saying why do you think that’s true? Why do you think so? That’s always disturbing.



MOYERS: After you’ve defined it, after you’ve spent all of your adult life living with it, how do you define philosophy today? What is philosophy?

ADLER: Well, let me see if I can give you an answer that is clear and concrete and intelligent. Philosophy, like science and like history, is a mode of inquiry...and a mode of inquiry adapted to answer certain questions that other modes of inquiry can’t. The historians can’t answer the questions the scientists ask. The experimental scientists can’t answer the questions the mathematician asks. The mathematician can’t answer the questions the historian has. But these three, history, mathematics and experimental science are modes of inquiry, each with methods adapted to answering certain questions. Now philosophy is a method of inquiry distinct from the other three designed to answer questions that none of

the other three can answer. And in my judgment those questions are among the most important questions human beings ever face.

There are two kinds. There are the speculative questions about the existence of God and the structure of the Universe, and about what it involves in anything existing or not existing, about the questions about the nature of man, the nature of the human mind which no scientist, historian or mathematician can answer. Those are the speculative questions which the philosopher is concerned with. But more important from the point-of-view of society are practical questions, formative questions, the questions about right and wrong, good and evil, ends and means, particularly ends to be sought. These are totally beyond any other mode of inquiry to answer. These are the most important philosophical questions. Unless we have answers to those, answers to all of the other questions are going to be dangerous for us.

MOYERS: We are a very pragmatic and commercial society, a society that's interested in getting things done and getting them done in a hurry. What's the role of philosophy in that kind of pragmatic society?

ADLER: Well, I would say the more pragmatic the society, the more the society is concerned with the means—the efficiency of the means—for getting things done, the more it needs philosophy to question it about the ends for which it's using the means.

The more you're concerned with the efficiency of the means, the more you should be instructed or asked to consider the ends, the more power you have—and we have, really, more power than is good for us—the more you should have that power checked in terms of how it's being used and again, the question of ends and values are the controlling.

MOYERS: Do you see any evidence that we're showing more wisdom in the use of our power?

ADLER: No, no.

MOYERS: Is that a roundabout way of saying that philosophy, the asking of these important questions, is having very little impact on us?

ADLER: Let me just say that in my judgment the most serious defect of modern culture, is the, shall I say, rejection of philosophy, the enthronement of science. Most Americans, most Europeans, I

guess it's true of most Russians, think that science has all the answers and that answers which are not achieved by the scientific method are not respectable as knowledge.

MOYERS: But science produces things. It produces dishwashers, garbage disposals, and medicine that heals bodies...

ADLER: That's right. Right. The question that you ought to ask me, 'cause students always did ask me this question: "That's why science is so wonderful. It's useful. What use is philosophy?" And the answer is there are two kinds of uses that knowledge has. One is productive. It produces dishwashers and medicines and so forth. And science is productive, technologically applied, and philosophy is totally non-productive. That the other use of knowledge is directive, not productive. It tells you where to go and how to get there. It tells you...in other words, if you ... wouldn't you like to be...don't you regard it as important to know where to go for a vacation and how to get there. That's not productive knowledge; that's directive knowledge, is it not? I mean, is it not directive knowledge to know what you should aim at in life and how to achieve that end. That's not productive knowledge. That's directive knowledge. Philosophy is directive, not productive. Science is productive, not directive.

MOYERS: If I hear you, you're saying we're not really asking as a society where are we going, we're just going there.

ADLER: We aren't asking where we ought to be going. Correct.

MOYERS: Adler has definite ideas about where we ought to go. The economic counterpart of political democracy, he says, is economic democracy. Men cannot exercise freedom in the political sphere when they are deprived of it in the economic sphere. So, with lawyer/author Lewis Kelso, Adler wrote a book called *The Capitalist Manifesto*. The idea, originally developed by Kelso, is to make capitalists of practically everyone. Families would have two sources of income, from wages and from capital, from shares in American enterprise. Income would rise from capital rather than from labor. This widely diffused capital ownership, far beyond anything we now have, Adler calls Universal Capitalism—the dream economy. He begins with a look at the economic history of mankind.

ADLER: And let me summarize and pull all this together for you with the diagram on the board, which I think is useful because it really, I think, summarizes all the existing impossible alternatives

that come out of the reading of this text and the related texts. Let me do that for you.

GLOSSARY

| | | | | |
|-----------------|---|------------------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|
| ⊙ FE | A | Bourgeois Capitalism | CPP UPR | ⊙ W ⊙ D |
| ⊙ FE | B | State Capitalism [Communism] | CCP NPR | ⊙ W ⊙ D |
| ⊙ FE | C | Socialized Capitalism [Mixed Economy] | CPP EPR | I → ⊙ W ⊙ D |
| ⊙ FE | D | Universal Capitalism [Dream Economy] | DPP RPR | ⊙ W ⊙ D |

| | |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| FE | Free Enterprise |
| FE | No free enterprise |
| ⓔ | Limited and regulated free enterprise |
| CPP | Concentrated private ownership of the means of production |
| CCP | Concentrated collective ownership of the means of production |
| DPP | Diffused private ownership of the means of production |
| UPR | Uneroded property rights |
| NPR | No private property rights |
| EPR | Eroded private property rights |
| RPR | Restored private property rights |
| W | no promotion of the general economic welfare for all |
| W | promotion of the general economic welfare for all -- the welfare state or society |
| D | the requisite economic basis for democratic government absent |
| D | the requisite economic basis for democratic government present |
| S | socialism -- the socialist goal being aimed at, which is identical with the promotion of the general economic welfare for all |
| I | inflation -- as something built into the mixed economy and incurable therein |


I've used the simple letters. A, B, C and D, so you can refer to the economies by saying the A-Economy, the B-Economy, the C... And we start off with above-the-line the economy that introduced Capitalism to the world, take Marx at his word and quite properly bourgeois Capitalism. Over here, this is a free enterprise capitalism, any question about it? Not only the private ownership of the means of production, but unregulated. No inroads, no government regulations, the free market, as free as you can get it. The Adam Smith ideal.

Let's follow it across the line. C. P. P. is what Marx says is true of it. It's not only private ownership of the means of production, but concentrated. One-tenth or less than one-tenth of the population owns all the means of production. And the property rights, P. R., are uneroded. That's the situation Marx is describing as existing in 19th Century England, 19th Century America, 19th Century Germany. And you say, does it exist anywhere in the world today? Maybe Peru, maybe it's Chili...not Chili, maybe it's Bolivia, Uru-

guay. Maybe it's Saudi Arabia. But I assure you it's only in backward countries, only in very backward countries, that anything like bourgeois Capitalism exists anywhere in the world today.

Over here, two very important symbols. W stands for welfare, the general economic welfare of the people. Welfare. Economic welfare. What in the Preamble of the Constitution said, "...promote the general welfare," which the economic Bill of Rights of 1944 define for the first time since Hamilton and Jefferson argued about it. That Bill of Rights which you read in the first day is what we mean by general economic welfare with everyone participating in it.

This economy, bourgeois Capitalism, is negative on welfare, obviously negative. If it were positive on welfare, the wide-spread misery wouldn't exist. And negative on democracy. Again, right on the point read what Henry George this morning, says about great inner qualities of wealth and the operation of democracy. You can't have political democracy without an economic base as well. And this society didn't give the economic base for democracy and democracy didn't flourish in that society.

I come now to the first reaction to this, which is Marx. B: negative on free enterprise. Obviously...none at all. I am using the word Capitalism all the way through here for the capital intensive economies. But the mode of ownership here is different. Here the state is the collector as a whole, which is concentrated on owners in private and no property rights at all in anyone's hands, except the right to the shirt on my back, but no property rights in the means of production. What does it achieve? It achieves welfare. Does it achieve democracy? I am now making a prejudiced Western judgment. No. They may think they do. I think they don't. That's for you to decide as you please, but I say it's positive on W and negative on D. 

We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.

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