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THE DIGNITY OF MAN AND THE 21ST CENTURY

Mortimer Adler's 1952 address to
the Commonwealth Club of California—
the nation's oldest and largest public affairs forum.



Club Introduction

Members of the Commonwealth Club, our speaker today belongs to that very select group of thinkers down through the ages who, without seeking controversy, have managed by some device to remain constantly the center of controversy. Professor Adler received his education, practically all of it at the higher levels, at Columbia University at a period when Columbia University, under the leadership of the late Dean Hawkes of Columbia College, had managed to become the chief center of ferment at the college level. I think that all that is good and most of what is bad in college teaching today stems from the Columbia of that period.

Dr. Adler got his technical training there as a psychologist. And then, in 1929, Robert Maynard Hutchins left the deanship of the Law School at Yale to become the President of the University of Chicago. Hutchins thought that he needed someone to dynamite the place, and so a year after he went there, that is in 1930, Dr. Hutchins took Mortimer Adler on as what might be called the official stirrer-upper of the University of Chicago.

Mortimer Adler went to Chicago as Professor of the Philosophy of Law. That, apparently, meant almost anything he wished to do. He promptly made himself intensely unpopular with all of his colleagues for two reasons: In the first place, he asked basic questions and gave unfashionable answers. In the second place, he wrote books, which not only could be read but were read by enormous numbers of people. Both of these crimes were unforgivable and, so far as I can see, in his 20 years at the University of Chicago, his unpopularity did not diminish by a jot or a tittle.

He got the Great Books movement started and that has insinuated itself over the country and now the Great Books are being merchandised for \$249.98, I believe. They are labeled *the* Great Books, some of us think of them as aren't they? Oh, just leave off the article. The implication has been *the*, some of us think *some*. But they are great books and this is the man who really is responsible. Mr. Adler has now induced the Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation to subsidize his thinking, and we San Franciscans should be greatly flattered that he has chosen to do his thinking among the fogs of Pacific Heights. Obviously, the Parnassus of the 20th, if not of the 21st century.

There is a fine lack of immediacy about this project. He, apparently, believes that it is going to take more than one election to solve all of our difficulties. This sense of the long view may have something to do with the topic, which Dr. Adler has chosen today: The 21st century. Dr. Mortimer Adler—

President White, members of the Commonwealth Club, my pleasure in addressing The Commonwealth Club today is exceeded only by my even greater pleasure in now being a resident member and very soon, I hope, a voting citizen of the commonwealth itself. At the moment, I am disfranchised. This is something that I think should be taken care of by constitutional amendment; it should be possible to move from state to state and still vote in presidential elections.

The announcement that I was to talk to you today on the 21st century, I think had its origin in the fact that last May and June, the time that I was trying to explain the work of the Institute of Philosophical Research to the press, I did say, I did mean, more than say, I meant that this work would probably take something around 50 years to do and its effect might be felt in the 21st century, if not the 20th. But I am not going to engage today with you in large-scale prophecies. It would be too much of a strain, I think, upon

your patience and your attention to indulge in guessing about things—what things would be like on October 10, 2052 when what all of you are interested in is in guessing about or betting what they're going to be like on November 4, 1952.

Let me only say in passing, at this point, that has something been made of, the work the Institute is engaging in is a long-term project—that is, if the money lasts—a long-term project that may go on for many years. This 50-year point is not the only thing that's perplexing about the House on the Hill. I find from all sorts of quarters that the phrase, "philosophical research" is not generally intelligible. People know what it means to be philosophical, and they know what it means for scientists and others to do research, but when the words philosophical and research get put together, this becomes mysterious. I'm not going to tell you all the indications of this and all my recent experiences, but I would like to mention three very quickly.

We've had quite a large number of phone calls at the Institute asking us when we are going to begin to conduct services. Last week, I was at the Hotel Huntington in Pasadena, and a manuscript came down to me there with the mailing label of the Institute on it. And, the bellboy that delivered to me at my room said, he said, "Doctor, this thing says philosophical research. What's that, what's that?" And I said, "Oh"—it was about a quarter to eight in the morning and I was in no mood to explain—I said, "Oh, that's just thinking, just thinking." And he said, "Oh, I'm very sorry." Obviously very disappointed. And he said, "Oh, I thought it had something to do with mental telepathy." And the third and most recent experience is this telegram I have in my hands from the head of the Speakers Bureau from one of the two national parties, I will let you guess which, asking me to go on tour and stump for one of the two candidates. That isn't the important fact. The important fact is that it's addressed to me as Mortimer J. Adler, Institute of Philanthropical Research. I think if I did what I was asked to do I *would* be the head of the Institute of Philanthropical Research.

Now to explain to you today, at least indirectly, the work of the Institute and its relation to the 21st century, I want to talk to you directly and immediately about an issue that I think is much deeper than all the issues in the present campaign—one on which our future depends much more than these that are being discussed, precisely because it is a matter of how our people as a whole, not just our leaders, think about human life and human society. This issue, which I shall elaborate on in some detail, this issue we tend to think of as an issue between East and West; as an issue between

democracy and communism, the issue which involves on our side respect for the dignity of man as the very basis of a free society versus the degradation of man under one or another form of totalitarianism. A week or more ago, General Eisenhower, in a speech in Milwaukee, said precisely this. He said, "Communism and freedom signify two titanic ideas; two ways of life, two totally irreconcilable beliefs about the nature and destiny of man. The one, freedom knows man as a creature of God blessed with a free and individual destiny, governed by eternal, moral, and natural laws. The second, communism, claims man to be an animal creature of the state, curses him for his stubborn instinct for independence, governs him with a tyranny that makes its subjects wither away."

On this, I think we can all be sure that Governor Stevenson would also agree. On this, there can be no, I think, real difference of opinion by anyone who could even begin to run for the presidency of the United States. Now, you may say, of course, that these two men would not agree about what they would do about it in the face of the issue. That may be true. What I want to say is that I think that it's more important, more important than this agreement about what to do about it is what we, as a people, now in this year and in the years to come, do about understanding the issue because the immediate practical steps we take are not wisely taken or well-advised unless they are taken upon a better understanding of what it means to affirm before, espouse the dignity of man.

It often seems to me that when we talk about this issue as being one between East and West, we fail to realize that it's a deep issue within our own national boundaries. It seems to me, or in some sense, more important for us to realize that this issue concerning the dignity of man, his nature and his destiny, is an issue in the very heart of American life itself. I do not mean that most of us, if asked the point-blank question, would not affirm in words like this respect for the dignity of the human person, his rights and liberties. I think we would all do that. But I mean that for many of us, and particularly for individual leaders, that affirmation might prove, in many cases, to be lip service. And the evidence for this point, which is, I think, a damaging one if true, the evidence for this point lies in the fact that there's so many aspects of American life, both in action and in speech and in thought, that stand in direct conflict with a genuine and understanding belief in the dignity of man.

It is not new to you, would be new to you to hear me say, it is not infrequently said, that American life is through and through materialistic. Not only materialistic in its preoccupation with the multiplication of things in productivity, in the comforts and conven-

iences of life, but materialistic even more deeply in the things we honor and respect. And, if this is true or to whatever extent it is true, this prevalent materialism in our view of things is in deep conflict with a genuine respect for the dignity of man, which is inseparable from some attribution to him of a spiritual nature.

There is also widespread in American life, a relativism about morals. The notion that good and bad, right and wrong are, for the most part, matters of opinion, subject to taste and individual preference, but not subject to universal principle and law. And here, again, this attitude, this relativism in morals, is in deep conflict with notions that are connected with the conception of man's personal dignity, conceptions that General Eisenhower mentioned of the natural moral law, the objective standards of right and wrong. And even more deeply than those two is, I think, for most of us in school or out, college graduates or not, a skepticism which is somehow widespread in the 20th century, a skepticism about the power of reason itself, either as a faculty for inquiring into the truth or as a faculty for guiding human life wisely and well.

One could go even more deeply, but to do so, I think, would have to go beyond philosophy and into religion. Because wherever there is—and, with respect to the dignity of man, these two things are not quite separable—wherever there is among us, doubt about man as created in the image of God, doubt about man's immortal soul and eternal destiny wherever there is a thoroughgoing naturalism, a reduction of man to the same natural plane that all other creatures are on; there again, I think, you have beliefs and doctrines that are fundamentally inconsistent with respect for the dignity of man.

Well, if this issue is our issue, it's not merely an issue of America versus Russia or East versus West, it's an issue right in America today. Then let's look at the issue a little more closely and examine what is involved in the two sides of it. Let me just state the issue first, then examine why it became *the* issue of the 20th century, and not of previous centuries, and face it both as a theoretical and a practical issue.

I think I would say that in order consistently and coherently and with full understanding of the grounds, in order to affirm the dignity of man and to affirm in addition that man and man alone of all terrestrial beings has this special dignity, one would have to affirm the following propositions: that man and man alone is a rational animal with free will; that all the other creatures on earth from stones up to apes, have no reason and no freedom, no choice, in the course of their behavior; that the kind of reason man has is, in the

conduct of human affairs, able to direct his free decisions, of the decisions that we make individually and as societies; that man is a person, not a thing, and that we understand that this distinction between being a person or being a thing is a distinction that is radically one of kind, not of degree: you can't be more or less of a person or more or less of a thing. All the objects in the world divide absolutely into persons and things, and man, on earth at least, man and man alone is a person, that as such, he is created, created in God's image and that, as a person with reason and free will, he has only as a person with reason and free will, does have inalienable natural rights, especially those of citizenship and all the basic civil rights and liberties. And that, as a person, with reason and free will, he is innately imbued with the natural moral law, which is the guide of his conduct and the source of his obligations and which finally appoints to him a good or end or goal that transcends this temporal life and the welfare of the state as such. This is a body of notions that hang together, no one of which, I think, can be torn apart from the others. If anyone is affirming, really affirming the dignity of man, he's affirming all these things together.

Now, on the opposite side, these are the denials which I think are involved in denying the dignity of man, any one of which involve the denial of man's dignity: that man differs from all the other things around him, from apes, all brute animals in general, or animals in general, and plants and stones, only in degree; that he differs only in degree, in consequence of his having an origin on earth by a natural evolution from these other things, particularly the higher forms of animal life; that he's not rational, but that he has a much greater power of intelligence, the same kind of intelligence, but much greater in degree than other animals, an intelligence useful to him in the struggle for existence and survival, an intelligence which so used gives him a rule of expediency. And since the Bible is the ultimate biological criterion here, it is a measure of expediency that judges what the intelligent decision is.

He is a creature like other creatures of instinct, though he has the power to rationalize. Not to direct by reason his conduct, but to give reasons for conduct that arises from deep irrational or unrational instinctive impulses. That he has no free will or free choice, but like all other things, is like a machine subject to the simple deterministic laws or even in the indeterministic laws of physics. And that, like other animals, particularly other social animals, he is subordinate to the life of the group and the life of the species of which he is a member. There are no universal moral principles that bind all men and oblige them and no man has, beyond this temporal sphere, a good or an end beyond the welfare of the state. Any

one of these things, any one of these things would I think involve the denial of man's dignity.

Now, this issue that I've sort of set up for you in terms of opposite affirmations and denials, I think, has come to the boiling point or has come into full focus only in our own century. I don't mean that it doesn't have its roots before, one can see it rising towards the end of the 18th coming even nearer, clearer into view, in the middle of the 19th with Darwin, but I think it is only in our century that a real confrontation of these two sides of the issue has occurred. Let me document that just a little in the time. And the reason why I think that this is important to recognize is that this is not an ancient issue. At least it wasn't an ancient issue that had the insistence it has today, and if I'm right about this, then this is an issue which what we do about one which our thinking about in the 20th century may have deep significance for the 21st.

If one went back through 25 centuries of the Western tradition—I want to stay with the West for a while—and, looked at it in terms of its Hebrew roots and development, its Greek and Roman, its Christian development, looked at all the major strains in that tradition, one would find ancient, medieval and modern down to the end of the 18th century, what I would like to call the great traditional view of man, which affirms his dignity in terms of the character of his reason and his freedom, the nature of his soul, the manner in which he was created, and the manner in which his destiny is appointed. It often seemed to me that though one could cite this philosopher or that philosopher to document the point—I don't mean to say that there isn't disagreement among philosophers on minor points there—nevertheless, in that famous speech which Hamlet gives in the second act, there is in the magnificent language of Shakespeare, an eloquent summary of the great traditional view that for almost 25 centuries, Western man had upheld man's nature and his place on earth. The lines that Hamlet speaks are these: "What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties. In form and moving, how express and admirable. In action, how like an angel. In apprehension, how like a god. The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

That, I say, was how man looked at himself and understood himself for almost the whole of the Western tradition. Only in the 20th century, only in the 20th century, does the opposite view become widely prevalent, especially, I would say, in our learned circles, in our colleges and universities. I don't mean that it began there, it begins with some dissenting voices on the part of Machiavelli and Montaigne. It begins with some dissent from Hume, but I think

that Freud, who was one of the great dissenters here, has really hit the nail on the head, when in a famous lecture recently, with one of the last lectures he gave in his life, he said that in the course of modern history, with the development of modern science, I quote him now, “Humanity, in recent times, has had to endure from the hands of science, three great outrages, three great outrages, upon its naïve self-love”.



Science, he says, has dealt three cruel blows to man’s self-esteem. What are they? One, Copernicus, the Copernican revolution that took man from being the inhabitant of the Earth which was the center of the universe, and put him out at the far edges of space, a speck upon a small planet, in a small solar system, in a small galaxy, moving at almost infinite speed away from other galaxies in an enormous universe which dwarfed him completely. This changed man’s estimation of himself.

Secondly, says Freud, the second great attack on man’s self-esteem came from Darwin. Not with the beginning of the negation of the notion that man was specially created in God’s image and a substitution, therefore, of the notion that he is like other things, a descendant from other creatures, in this case, a descendant from a common ancestor with the anthropoid apes.

And then the third great blow dealt to man’s self-esteem and his conception of himself, Freud says, quite modestly, “I, myself, delivered.” “When, through my work, through the work of modern psychology,” meaning himself, of course, “we learned that it was not through reason and free will that man was a master of his own conduct, but rather that man was subject to instinctive drives, unconscious impulses and emotions which, at best, he can only rationalize and not really control.” And, since Freud wrote this, there’s even a fourth, not so much on this continent as in Western Europe, a fourth great blow to man’s self-esteem, an attack upon the traditional conception of man which comes from all varieties of 20th century existentialism.

This, I say, Freud is right. This issue has come to focus in our time because, slowly, slowly, the results of modern astronomy, modern

biology, and modern psychology have made us feel that man is not what once man thought he was. This is our issue more than any other because, as we decided, we decided about a great many other things, about man's moral responsibilities, about man in relation to the state, about the very nature of government. And I say it is not merely an issue between East and West, but one we must decide for ourselves because I do not think that most Americans have understood this issue or know what they mean or are even consistent in the way they take one side or the other of it.

Let's go back to the issue again. Let me see if I can state the issue in its essence, purely theoretically, and then state it practically for you. Because there's theoretical questions here and then there are deep, practical questions that flow in consequence from these theoretical issues. On the theoretical side, purely a matter of pure speculation, science or philosophy, either one, makes no difference now for the moment. The question is, when one looks at the whole of nature, looks at the whole of nature, whether that nature, the whole of nature, the world, the things, is constituted as a hierarchy of kinds with real steps up in grades of being, one thing really higher in being, in value than another. Or whether the whole of nature represents a continuum from the least particle to the most complex organization of matter, nevertheless, a continuum of degrees of the same kind of thing. And whichever one of those divisions you take, you look at man differently.

Again, it's a basic theoretical question as to whether or not the laws of natural evolution, which do apply to the kind of species the botanists and zoologists deal with, also apply to the great distinctions among the forms of life and especially the man, the question whether man, in fact, originated on Earth by natural evolution—the Darwinian theory of man's descent—or by God creating him. This is an issue you can't take both sides on. It either happened one way or the other. And, accordingly, as you take one side or the other, you look at man differently and judge the question of his dignity differently.

And the third is an issue, theoretically now, between all forms of materialism and mechanism on the one hand, and on the other, the notion that the world is not constituted of matter only, it does not always operate in the form of mechanical laws or mechanical procedures. For, as against the claims of the thoroughgoing materialist or mechanist, there would be on the opposite side the claim that though man has a body and his body obeys the laws of mechanics, in part, man also has a soul, which is a spiritual soul that has other laws and grounds.

Now, as you face this theoretical issue, practical consequences flow as follows: four, let me take just three to illustrate this. Let's think of our whole system of laws in Western Europe—Greek, Roman, Germanic, Anglo-American common law, the common jurisprudence of the Western world. If there is any fundamental distinction upon which that jurisprudence rests, it is the distinction between person and thing. The law of the person, the law of the thing. Persons have rights that things do not. Just think of the words, “kill” and “murder.” You can destroy a thing, you cannot murder a thing, and I mean by the word “thing” now to include all the forms of animal life and plant life. You can't murder a rose, you can't murder a dog, you can kill a dog, but you can only murder a man, as we understand these terms because the thing we're involved here in the notion of murder is the violation of something sacred and only, by the distinction of persons and things, is a life of a person sacred, not the existence of a thing. Mr. Schweitzer disagrees with this, and many in the East disagree with this, but all I want to do is draw the lines here for you.

Nor can you enslave a thing, you cannot exploit. You can misuse an animal wantonly, but you can't exploit a domesticated animal. You can't enslave an animal. Why can't you? Because the animal is a thing and is, therefore, of such a sort that it can be a means used. It is just, it is just and right to use things as means, but if men are persons, it is neither just nor right to ever use, ever to use them as means or merely as means for what a person is, is that which must be treated as an end. Always regard it as an end to be served and never as a mere means to be used. So, I say if man is not a person, if man is merely a higher grade or degree of thing, then all of our fundamental jurisprudence in the West should be revised. Or, we must go on saying, well, even though man isn't really a person, we will, for some practical reasons, treat him as if he were, which, I think is utterly unsound and unsteady.

Well, let's look at democracy for a moment. The essence of democracy is not liberty. The essence of constitutional government is liberty, but democracy goes beyond liberty to equality. The essence of democracy is equality, the equality of all men, the equality of all men as men and as citizens. Now, you know, every time anyone examines the Declaration of Independence and reads the line, “We hold these true to be self-evident” that God created all men equal, all men were created equal, there usually can be a great deal of sophistry about it. Everyone says, “Well, it's perfectly obvious it isn't true. All men are not equal.” The most obvious thing about any thousand men you can collect in one place is their great

inequality in almost every human trait. Some are more intelligent, some are taller, some are stronger, some have better stances, some have better health, unequal in every respect.

If this is true, if men differ in degree from one another, as men as a whole—the opposite position says, differ in degree from their nearest animal kin, the apes—then I say to you, there is no equality of men, there are only approximate equalizations of a degree. And, if we are justified by our superiority in degree over the other animals, in treating them as we do, killing them without calling it murder, using them without calling it slavery, then I say the superior man or the superior race of men is just as much entitled to take inferior men in degree and enslave them or kill them for his needs or purposes.

The only way to protect intellectually, to save yourself from this position, is to say no: Men differ in degree, but only within a fundamental equality which is theirs because they are all persons and differ radically in kind from all other things, which are things. In other words, the proposition that all men were created equal means equal as persons, not equal as individuals. Equal in that they all are persons and have the rights of persons. Without this affirmation, democracy doesn't stand. For upon the equality of human rights, in virtue of personality, also from that flows the equality of men as citizens and all the other democratic propositions about equal, social, political and economic opportunity and right.

Finally, let's go from the legal to the political to the religious aspect of our lives. And you will react to this in proportion as you think that religion is an important part of a culture or an important part of Western culture in the fight that exists in the world today. If you do, then what I'm saying is serious because the validity of all the Western religions; Judaism, Mohammedism, and Christianity in all its forms, I think depends upon the proposition that man and man alone is created in God's image.

If this proposition is not true, then I think certainly Christianity, and I think with it Judaism and the Mohammedism as well, have no genuine basis for all the things that they recommend for men to do, for the salvation they promise, for the moral and spiritual life they exhort men to undertake. And here at this point, by the way, you have the deepest rift between East and West, a rift that may take centuries, way past the 21st century, to overcome, because in any culture, such as that of India, in which there are sacred animals—let me make this one point—in which there are any sacred animals and in which those sacred animals take precedence, have

priority over human life, you've got a totally different picture of what man is and of human society and human life. The Western religions and the Western religions alone, I think, make man the sacred animal and no other. This is not true, I think, for other religions and, particularly, for the great religions or philosophies of the East. And this difference between East and West on the dignity, sacredness of man, is one much deeper than all the political issues that we face in the world today and affects the problem we face when we consider the unity of the world, politically and culturally.

Now, in terms of this issue, let me take one moment more at the end of this half hour to explain the work of the Institute and its relation to the 21st century. We have chosen this problem, the nature, origin, and destiny of man as the first subject on which we want to do, what we call, philosophical research. Let me say it once what we are not going to do. We are not going to argue or develop arguments for one side of this set of issues against the other. That would be to no avail, the arguments exist pretty well developed, as a matter of fact. There are many forceful exponents of both sides of these issues. And to argue some more on one side or the other, I think, for the most part, would not produce the result we are looking for. Instead, what we want to do is to take this issue and many others after it—this is merely the first—and try to clarify it by stating the questions, the questions that all sides of the controversy are engaging in, facing, undertaking to answer as precisely as possible and more than that, connecting those questions with one another so inexorably that the basic either/ors become inescapable choices for everyone.

I can make the importance of this clear to you by addressing myself to you personally, I hope with no injustice done to anyone. In this audience, for example, right now, it would be my guess that there are many persons whose minds are on both sides of this basic issue, whose minds are really—there are logic—type compartments who affirm one thing when they think about that and then quite inconsistently, incoherently even, affirm something incompatible with it over here, and don't know it because, I think, no one of decent intellectual self-respect really, really embraces inconsistencies and contradictions gladly.


There are people in this audience, most of you, for example, I'm sure affirm the dignity of man with a goodness of a free society and the rightness, the justice of democratic government. But I'm also sure that many of you affirming that would accept the Darwinian hypothesis as to man's origin or of Freudian or behavioris-

tic psychology concerning his nature and actions: that many of the persons who would affirm man's dignity would also deny, that man had free will or deny that man has a spiritual or immortal soul and would certainly doubt, if not deny that there's anything supernatural about man in origin or destiny.

Now, if the work you want to do can achieve this, if the basic either/ors—either this or that, either this or that—were made clear and all of them, either this or that, either this or that, so far as we could divide in twos or threes or fours, not necessarily always in twos, were seen in their inseparable connections with one another, then everyone who could think and would desire to think might realize that on many of these questions there is no middle ground, no compromise, no refuge from clarity or coherence or consistency.

This is what we're going to try to do with respect to this first subject, and after that, with a succession of other fundamental issues both theoretical and practical that have occupied the attention, the thought, the concern of the whole Western tradition. It is my own faith that when issues become clear to people and when all the basic choices involved in those issues become connected for them, that the truth prevails. I personally think the truth lies on one side of this issue. I'm not being open-minded about this, but I'm saying that much stronger than arguing for the side I personally adhere to is making everyone realize themselves what the issues are and what the choices are and let them choose. It is my firm faith in human reason that when the issues are made clear enough and all the connections are put on the table, the human mind is itself a good instrument, and if it is of goodwill, it chooses aright. And, in addition to this faith, I have the hope, I have the hope that the 21st century, not so far off anymore, will find the planet still spinning with atomic energy used for good rather than evil purposes, will find democracy and freedom triumphant against all its enemies, but I hope for much more than that, because I personally do not think that democracy in America today has a firm foundation. I think it has a firm foundation in our political tradition. I think we are rapidly losing the ideas, the basic principles, which are its lifeblood. And unless we manage somehow in this country and elsewhere to find its fundamental bases in truth, democracy may be defended by the sword, but it will not long survive or flourish in fact.

So that my hope is more than that by the power of might, democracy and freedom will triumph. More than that, that the traditional view of man, which as I see at least, has been the very heart of the Western tradition, that that traditional view will once more become

the dominant and prevalent view, not only throughout the West,
but everywhere in the world. Thank you 

EDITOR'S NOTE

You may listen to Dr. Adler's address in whole or part at The
Commonwealth Club's website:

[http://www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/20thcentury/
52-10adler-audio.html](http://www.commonwealthclub.org/archive/20thcentury/52-10adler-audio.html)

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