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FIRING LINE: WHAT IS INTELLECT?

William F. Buckley, Jr.
interviews
Mortimer Adler

Michael Kinsley: Welcome to Firing Line. I am Michael Kinsley of *The New Republic* magazine. Anyone who doesn't know who Mortimer J. Adler is hasn't been watching Firing Line. He is the author of forty-five books. And most of them, I suspect, have been occasions for his appearance on this program.

Dr. Adler is a philosopher by profession and chairman of the board of editors of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His latest book, for the moment at least, is called *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. In it, he comes to the defense of his old friends, the ancient philosophers, in a critique of modern materialism. Not materialism in the sense of greed or love of possessions but materialism in the philosophical

sense—the proposition that reality consists only of things that have physical existence.

In particular, Adler’s book is intended to restore the idea of the human mind as something greater than just the human brain. Modern disciplines from behavioral psychology to computer science all tend to treat the human mind as a machine that is fully knowable through knowledge of its physical parts. Dr. Adler argues that intellect is a special power of the human mind that truly exists though it has no physical manifestation. It makes the human mind different in kind, not just in degree, from that of animals. “The ancients knew this truth,” Dr. Adler says, “but it had started to be forgotten or overlooked around the seventeenth century.” So we are going to bring you up to date here.

Mr. Buckley, Dr. Adler says he is not making a theological point here, that this nonmaterial quality of the human intellect is not the same thing as a soul. But given what we know about animals like dolphins, is it really possible to claim any kind of uniqueness for the human mind without some kind of religious leap of faith?

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.: Well, I think there are theological implications in what Dr. Adler says, but I think that his thesis is one that could as well be maintained by an atheist, though he himself would have to recognize that there are theological implications. In fact, you probably—I am trying to remember whether you cite in this book any nonbelievers who take the same position that you do by the distinctives of this—

MORTIMER J. ADLER: Well, Aristotle himself. And Plato, for example—

BUCKLEY: Well, yeah. I mean, modern.

ADLER: No, I would think not. Though the argument is entirely in terms of philosophical—it has nothing—there is no theology in the argument at all.

BUCKLEY: No.

ADLER: As you would say, there are consequences.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: If the immaterial of the intellect is denied, that raises a very serious question about the immortality of the soul. If the im-

materiality of the intellect is affirmed, there is some reason for supposing that an immortal soul is possible. It is not an argument that proves the existence of immortal soul at all.

BUCKLEY: Or what one would be required to say is that if it is true of the mind, why ought it not also be true of the soul?

ADLER: Well, you see, the word *soul*, at least as Aristotle used it, and Plato also, is something common to vegetables and animals and man. I mean, the soul is not a human—the human soul is intellectual. But dolphins have souls. And the Greeks used the word *soul* merely as a form of the body. They weren't thinking of the soul as immaterial at all. Only the intellectual soul is immaterial. For Aristotle, for example, who thinks the intellect is immaterial, the soul is a material form.

BUCKLEY: Yeah, but in saying it was a material form, he simply didn't cope with certain post-Christian modalities, right?

ADLER: Until—

BUCKLEY: For instance, the word *insoulment* could only happen of a human being?

ADLER: In the—up until the twelfth century most Christian theologians were Platonists because Plato thought the soul and the body were like two separate substances, as Descartes did. The Platonic Era of dualism, the soul and body being two separate substances, which later came out in Descartes' *res extensa/res cogitans* was very comfortable to them. If the soul—the argument for the immortality of the soul is in Plato's dialogue *Phaedo*. And when the body collapses and perishes, corrupts, the soul is released. It is this that leads Wordsworth in that great poem, *Ode, Intimations of Immortality*, to say that “We come from heaven, which is our home.” And, “Shades of the prison-house fall fast.” When the soul is encased in the body, that is a prison house. The soul is in some sense carrying a burden in the body. It was much—in the spiritual substance it is better outside the body. That's not Aristotle's theory at all.

And Saint Thomas, when he adopted the Aristotelian theory, had his books burned at the University of Paris and entered the University of Oxford. Because in the Middle Ages—the Christian theologians of the Middle Ages were so used to being Platonists and thinking of the soul as immaterial and therefore, obviously, imper-

ishable, that the notion of the soul being a form of the body and like the souls of animals and plants—

BUCKLEY: But in terms of the mind, were the same distinctions observed or were they modified?



ADLER: Well, you see, both Plato and Aristotle recognized that only the intellect and the senses—and they both would have said that man, and man alone, is intellectual. Man has an intellect. What Plato says about the soul, Aristotle says about the intellect only. In other words, in a sense man is four-fifths—the body is material organs. Your digestive tract, your sensory—

BUCKLEY: Your brain is 90% water or whatever it is.

ADLER: That's possible, yes. One-fifth of you, the intellectual power, which is not in your brain, is a very small portion. Human spirituality is very slight. In a book on angels I wrote many years ago, I said that the tendency to look upon man as on two sides of the fence, both in the world of man and the world of spirit isn't quite right. Man has both his feet in the world of matter. And is leaning over the fence, as it were, with his intellect into the world of spirit.

BUCKLEY: Let me ask you, Dr. Adler, to parse the meaning of what you write about here. For instance, we are all familiar with the saying in the Bible, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." Now, does that presuppose, if one were to come across that state-

ment all by itself, that the flesh dominates the spirit or in this case the mind or the intellect?

ADLER: Though we generally use the word *spirit* in a very loose sense. If you asked anyone on the street or anywhere else what they meant by the word *spirit*, they couldn't tell you. That is because we have no perception of spirits. And our own real understanding of it is negative. The spirit is that which is immaterial, incorporeal.

BUCKLEY: Why is that negative to say it is immaterial? Why does that say—why is that negative?

ADLER: Well, it is just saying it is not material.

BUCKLEY: Well, love is immaterial, but that's not negative.

ADLER: No. I am only saying our knowledge of it is not—I can't say what spirit is positively. I can only say what it is not. It is not a material thing. It is not bodily. It is not physical in any sense.

BUCKLEY: Well, but if you say—all right, if you say the mind is willing but the flesh is weak, what you in effect are saying is that the body tends to control the mind. It tends to. Tends to is the operative word here—not necessarily does.

ADLER: And it takes a good deal of willpower to overcome the opposition of the flesh.

BUCKLEY: Now the willpower defined in context of the book that you write is the exercise of the intellect.

ADLER: Yes, the will is an intellectual power.

BUCKLEY: Intellectual power?

ADLER: Yes.

BUCKLEY: Now that can direct, for instance, it can direct a food fast up to the point of starvation.

ADLER: Um, huh, it can indeed.

BUCKLEY: It can direct suicide.

ADLER: It can do that, yes.

BUCKLEY: Murder, or whatever?

ADLER: Yes, yes.

BUCKLEY: Now, why is it important? Tell us why it is important that you should prove the immaterialization of the mind as distinguished in making it simply another bodily function.

ADLER: I don't quite understand which you were asking. Are you asking me what they—

BUCKLEY: What is the opposite position from yours?

ADLER: The opposite position is that the brain is the organ in which we—the brain is the organ of thought as the eye is the organ of vision.

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: As the ear is the organ, the physical organ. My position is quite different from that. I am saying—in fact, I think the best way I can say it—I have said it in the book—is we cannot think without our brains, but we don't think with them.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh.

ADLER: Now, let me correct the eye. We cannot see without our eyes, and we see with them.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh.

ADLER: We cannot hear without our ears, and we hear with them. The brain is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of intellectual activity. Now, you say, why do you hold to that? And the answer to that may be difficult to state, but let me try it. We, in our ordinary speech, our vocabulary is filled with words of what are called common nouns. Every common noun—man, cow, tree, atom, liberty—any common noun names something universal. A proper name—Bill Buckley, Mortimer Adler, and president of the United States, a phrase like the President of the United States in 1990 names one person.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh.

ADLER: All our common names, they are universals. Our concepts are all universal in character. Now, the point about universal is that it can't be in matter. What makes—let me take for a moment two almost perfectly identical ball bearings. Indistinguishable.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh.

ADLER: Why do you say there are two? Because one occupies this space, and one occupies that space. If they occupied the same space, they would be one, wouldn't they?

BUCKLEY: Um, huh, correct.

ADLER: It never makes them identical. What makes them two is they are matter. Two units of matter cannot be in the same place. So matter, in the Middle Ages, it was very smart when they said that matter is the principle of individuation.

Now if we thought with our brains, we could only do—as we see with our eyes, as we imagine with our eyes—For example, you and I couldn't imagine a triangle. You could imagine a scalene triangle or an equilateral triangle, a right triangle, a large triangle, a small triangle, a blue triangle, a green triangle. Everything you imagine is particularized—

BUCKLEY: To say it, yeah—

ADLER: If you try to imagine triangle itself, you can't do it. Why can't you do it? It is because to think "triangle," you don't have to use your brain. If you used your brain to think like imagining—you use your brain to imagine. You use your eyes and your brain, your ears and your brain, to see—everything you see, imagine, remember in the sensitive fashions are always particular—

BUCKLEY: But this only when we deal with universals, right? What about, say, God? Is He universal?

ADLER: Definitely so.

BUCKLEY: Well, what about when you think God?

ADLER: Well, that is—you see, God is not a concept in the ordinary sense. God is an extraordinary intellectual construct. That is a very hard term. In fact, God is not a universal. God is a proper name in a sense. If I were to substitute a phrase for God, I would say "The Supreme Being who created the cosmos." That professes one Supreme Being. So that is like a proper name like the Presi-

dent of the United States in 1990. So God is not—it is a very special construct—

BUCKLEY: So you are taxonomizing Him uniquely?



ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY: Yeah. So in that sense you can't think God in a multiplicity.

ADLER: No.

BUCKLEY: But, well, the whole idea of monotheism?

ADLER: No, we talk about divinities.

BUCKLEY: Yes, that is the—

ADLER: That is the difference between them. Divinity is a universal truth.

BUCKLEY: Yes. Now, when you say that—when you say how you established that intellect is the mind over matter, you prescind it from the brain and assign to it therefore what function that would be considered uncommon by a naturalist or a philosophical materialist?

ADLER: Well, I would say that human thinking, the kind of thinking that computers can't do—my strongest argument is against the notion of reducing the brain, the human thinking to a computer. You know, the artificial intelligence board thinks they are going to—they still haven't done it, but they think the future holds the promise of a machine that will be indistinguishable in performance from a human being.

BUCKLEY: Yes, electronic thought—

ADLER: I think that is impossible because, you see, if the brain were the organ of thought, they could do it. That is because I think they can replicate the brain in another material organ. But if the intellect, and not the brain, is the organ of thought, they will not be able to produce a machine that can do specifically human thinking. Let me make a point about that. All logical thought is mechanical. They can produce machines that would be logical. But the one thing about human thought is it is not logical. We can be logical, but all of our great leaps of—

BUCKLEY: Our acts of transcendence?

ADLER: Yes, that's right.

BUCKLEY: Well, you are not telling me, are you, because I read a little bit of this stuff that there are people around who are saying they can develop a computer that will give you a response which you hadn't pre-fettered, are they?

ADLER: No. They talk about the computer having access to randomness but I—

BUCKLEY: Like the monkeys who type out *Hamlet*?

ADLER: Yes, that's right. But the way you can imagine this is suppose you took an ocean voyage that lasted, let's say, two months. And you had a deck chair. And someone was sitting next to you. And you met every morning on the deck. And you talked to this fellow next to you every day for two hours. Could you predict on any day what the turn of the conversation would be the next day? You couldn't. And a long—

BUCKLEY: You couldn't with certitude, but you could with high probability. But hydro—

ADLER: Nevertheless, there would be all kinds of surprises, wouldn't there?

BUCKLEY: Yes.

ADLER: He or you would say something that you hadn't thought of before. In other words a long human conversation is unprogrammable. You couldn't program it. It is unpredictable.

BUCKLEY: You mean you couldn't program it in terms of logical succession, or you couldn't program it any way?

ADLER: You couldn't program a computer to do that, for example. In other words—

BUCKLEY: I can think of a lot of democrats I could program with that.

ADLER: I'm sure you could. But if there were a screen between you and the fellow next to you on the deck chair—

BUCKLEY: Yeah.

ADLER: And the question is, could you tell whether you were having this conversation with a machine or a human being? I think you always could. I think you always could tell whether the conversation was between you, by the way, of course, there were no voices involved. Everything was transmitted by printout. You could ask any question you wanted, and you kept on asking them over the course of two months, I think you would soon—if it ever happened that you could—I don't know why. It would be 50/50. I can't tell whether it is a machine I am talking to or a machine. I would be wrong.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh. Right.

ADLER: I'd tear it all up. But if I think that would never happen. In other words, I think indiscernibility of a machine from a human being is never going to happen. Machines will never function so that they will be indiscernible from human beings. And the reason for that is—that is the importance of this thing. It is the immateriality of our intellect. If the brain did the job, I would be wrong.

BUCKLEY: Okay, let me just close down on this. Suppose I were here the naturalist and I were to say to you, "The brain is competent to make responses so copious that it is inconceivable that we

could ever program it to reply to every contingent question you might ask it, under the circumstances, won't it always surprise you even if it were simply the brain itself rather than the intellect?"

ADLER: Um, huh. But if it were the brain itself—that is the other side of the argument. In terms of what matter does, if it is the brain, you would have no universal concepts whatsoever. I am saying the brain cannot be an organ which operates with universals because matter—I repeat now about the triangle. Why is it you can't imagine a triangle as such? Why do we—any picture you would form in your mind of a triangle would be of some shape, size, and color?

BUCKLEY: You know, there is a wonderful exchange in *Huckleberry Finn* between the old darkie, the old Negro Jim, who is illiterate, and either Huck or Tom Sawyer says to him, "In France, the word for cow is *vache*." And he says, "Well, how can that be? A cow is a cow. How can it be other things? And this was really an instruction in universals to an illiterate, wasn't it?"

ADLER: Um, huh. That's right.



BUCKLEY: Now, are you saying that this would be an indication of the working of the intellect because he couldn't imagine?

ADLER: No, it is the fact that—if you could not rise above your imagination—above, you could not think triangle.

BUCKLEY: Yeah, um, huh.

ADLER: You could not think triangle. You could imagine triangles at any time. They all would be of some shape, size, and color. But just think of God for a moment. You can't imagine God.

BUCKLEY: Is that constitutional?

ADLER: It's by constitution. You can—the reason why most people have trouble with God in heaven is that they—I had great difficulty with the con—in church with people who think that heaven is a place, for example. Now if God is a purely spiritual being, God does not exist in any physical place whatsoever. It is a state of being which is the divine, but not a place. And one of the reasons why the great Jewish theologian Maimonides and Saint Thomas, following the rabbi, insisted upon negative theology is because you cannot positively think of God. People who imagine God, you imagine God and anthropomorphize God, as the artists do, of course. You have to think of God negatively—incorruptible, non-temporal, immaterial, immutable. You think of all of those negative words. And when you think of God positively, there are three positive things you can say about God: God lives, God knows, and God wills.

BUCKLEY: God lives or God exists?

ADLER: Lives. Whenever you say God exists, lives, wills, and knows, you have to immediately add, “but not as you and I exist, not as you and I live, not as you and I know, not as you and I will,”—that *not* comes in there because if you don't do that, you are saying that the word *live* is applied univocally, in the same sense to God and you.

BUCKLEY: Well, but does a Christian have this problem with the Incarnation?

ADLER: Oh, see, that is a very difficult problem. Very difficult. But you are way ahead of me now. The problem with the Incarnation is that it is a Christian mystery. It is more complicated than the problem of the intellect and God. What the Incarnation is in the creed is one substance of two natures. That's difficult to think. But there is a reason for that, Bill. If you asked yourself, why did God reveal anything to us—as Christians and Jews, we think that we have a divine revelation in sacred Scripture, correct?

BUCKLEY: Um, huh.

ADLER: Would God have revealed anything to us that we could under—that we could normally think by ourselves? No, it would be a waste of time, wouldn't it? So what He revealed is something we can't really understand very well.

BUCKLEY: Well, then He didn't reveal it very well.

ADLER: No. The invitation is ours. That is, the infinite talking to the finite is an interesting kind of jump across a bridge.

BUCKLEY: Well, you are saying that revelation, *ex natura* has to do be describable?

ADLER: It is difficult to under—Maritain said the mysteries, the Christian mysteries are intelligible in themselves but not to us completely. And the fact is, I think it is proper for divine revelation.

BUCKLEY: In other words, you can concede their internal coherence without conceding the intelligibility?

ADLER: That's right.

BUCKLEY: Um, huh. And to what extent does this independent intellect, the mind over matter, to what extent is it critical for approaching revelation or understanding it?

ADLER: I assure you, you couldn't even begin to think about it. If the materialists were correct, if the brain is the organ of thought, not just the organ of sense and imagination and memories, I tell you it is an organ. It is a very important organ. Without it, we couldn't think at all. But we don't think with it. If the brain were the organ we thought with, I think we wouldn't have any way at all of even stating the mysteries of the Christian religion.

BUCKLEY: How did Santayana handle that problem? By simply dismissing it as poetry?

ADLER: Yes. One phrase he used in *The Life of Reason in Religion* is to say that religion is the poetry in which you believe. I think that is a false statement.

KINSLEY: Excuse me. Mr. Buckley, I didn't realize until today that dolphins have souls.

ADLER: Potatoes do, too.

KINSLEY: Well, let me ask you then, that being the case why is Dr. Adler so completely confident that dolphins don't have intellects? What is it that is uniquely human about this nonmaterial aspect of thought?

ADLER: No activity—there are dolphins that communicate with one another. They are very intelligent—in fact, the word *intellect* and *intelligence* are not the same. That dolphins are more intelligent than chimpanzees, I think, are clear. Their brain/body ratio is the highest next to man. But all of the perceptual activities of the dolphins—imagine them—they are not intellectual.

KINSLEY: How do you know? How do you know they are not swimming around thinking about triangles?

ADLER: I don't know. In a sense I can't say that there is no evidence of it positively. You say how do I?—I don't know in the sense that I have direct evidence that they are not intellectual. But I have never met an intellectual dolphin, have you?

KINSLEY: So is anti-intellectualism one proof—


ADLER: Yes, I think so.

KINSLEY: The intellect is something larger than the brain?

ADLER: No, no. It is one proof that man is the only anti-intellectual animal. We have no evidence that dolphins are anti-intellectual or that pigs or horses are either.

KINSLEY: And not potatoes?

ADLER: No, they are definitely not. And if you think about that, think about that a long time, you will see that the peculiar characteristic of man with intellect is there are lots of anti-intellectual men—human beings.

BUCKLEY: Think about that a long time. Well, thank you very much, Dr. Mortimer Adler, author of most recently *Intellect: Mind Over Matter*. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Kinsley. 

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