

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## the professor or THE DIALOGUE?

Mortimer J. Adler

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• IN TWO PARTS •

### EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

*For many years Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, now head of the Institute for Philosophical Research, has vigorously attempted to revitalize the idea of a genuine liberal arts education. Throughout these years, because of his views, he has been a very controversial philosopher. Because of his dislike of the table-thumping "professor," and his encouragement of the dialogue, he has been accused of being a "relativist."*

*Because he believes in reason, he has been called a “rationalist.” One will recall that in the thirteenth century, St. Thomas was considered a “dangerous innovator.” Obscurantism never dies, and seldom fades away. Even those who pretend to stand for the liberal arts oppose Adler, or neatly avoid him, so that they can continue converting the liberal arts college into a professional school and substituting textbooks for the Great Books.*

*The Owl has traditionally believed that the liberal arts college exists to produce liberal artists, free men prepared to live a meaningful life. And it, like the Cross Currents Club on this campus following Dr. Adler, believes that the dialogue is of crucial importance in achieving such an education. The Cross Currents recently presented the First Cross Currents Award for stimulating dialogue to Dr. Adler; during that occasion Dr. Adler delivered the Cross Currents Lecture of the Year (1958-1959) “the professor or THE DIALOGUE?” Consequently The Owl is happy and privileged to publish this outstanding lecture by an outstanding philosopher and educator.*

*Special thanks are due to the Reverend George V. Kennard, S.J., who edited the manuscript, to Geraldine and Irene Palermo, who transcribed the lecture from the tape-recording, and to fast-footed Jim Mitchell, who took the manuscript to Dr. Adler for approval. Without their help, and the help of others too numerous to mention, The Owl could not have published “the professor or THE DIALOGUE?”*



LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: I am not only deeply honored by this plaque<sup>1</sup> but I am delighted with the title that was invented for this talk. “the professor or THE DIALOGUE?” is an excellent caption for the remarks which the person who invented it could not have known I was going to make. I am very happy indeed for this opportunity to take part in discussions that obviously have been going on around this campus for the whole of this year.

My delight unfortunately is accompanied by one regret: that as I grow older there are many things about which I am both less clear and less hopeful than I was when I was younger. I am less clear about what should be done in college and less hopeful about what can be expected from college. Hence, I must ask you to forgive me in advance if I am unable to defend with adamantine vigor one right solution of the problem. There is one that I favor; but I would hesitate to say that I know it to be the only right solution. So, instead of stating simply and dogmatically what a program for a college should be and what the teacher should be like, I shall deal with a number of topics relevant to the problem of learning in general and to teaching and study in a liberal arts college in particular.

One further warning I should like to make in advance. In some thirty or thirty-five years of thinking about education and twenty-five or more of teaching in colleges and universities, I have been mainly engaged with secular institutions. Quite frankly, such conclusions as I have reached about liberal education in college are mainly conceived within the framework of the secular institution. I am deeply sensitive of the fact that the Catholic college has different tasks and different problems from those of secular institutions. Perhaps not all of the points I shall make hold true of both secular and Catholic institutions; nevertheless it seems to me that some of them do, if not equally or without qualification, because they are based on human nature and the inhabitants of both kinds of institutions are human beings. But even those points which may need modification when applied in the framework of specifically Christian education can be best understood, I think, by looking at them in the more general context of secular education. I shall try to warn you in every case when I am shifting from thinking of the secular institution to thinking of the specifically Catholic institution.

With these preliminary explanations, let me indicate the topics I

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<sup>1</sup> “First Annual Cross Currents Award, presented by the Cross Currents Club of Santa Clara University to Mortimer J. Adler in recognition of his distinguished and continuing contribution to the cause of intellectual dialogue in the culture of our time: The Great Conversation.”

would like to discuss. First, I should like to talk most generally and in the most elementary fashion about the role of the teacher at any point in the educational scheme and the attitude of students toward teachers. Secondly I should like to talk about the relation of *schooling* to education. Third, I should like to talk about the main aims of liberal schooling—note that I said liberal schooling, not liberal education. Fourth, I shall come more narrowly to the problem, within liberal education, of the teaching of philosophy and the history of philosophy. Finally I shall draw some conclusions about the study of philosophy and its difficulties. I think these five points deal with the problems you have been discussing. I hope that what I say may elicit from you new questions that will in turn enable me to clarify, later, whatever is not clear in this presentation.

We begin, then, with the nature of the teacher—to my mind, one of the most fascinating subjects men have ever thought about. Curiously enough, so far as I know, in the great tradition of western thought there have emerged only two views of the role or nature of the teacher. One we find in the dialogues of Plato, represented and advocated by Socrates, particularly in the *Theatetus* and the *Meno*; the other, which appears to be a different theory of the teacher, at the other extreme, is found in St. Thomas—in the *De Veritate*, the question often reprinted as the *De Magistro* (On the Teacher), and at the end of the first part of the *Summa Theologica*. There is, of course, another view, that taken by St. Augustine in the little work called the *De Magistro*. But in fact St. Augustine is really to the left of Socrates, and I think the Platonic position is better represented by taking Socrates rather than St. Augustine.

Two words (from medicine, by the way) state for you very dramatically the characteristics of the teacher. According to Socrates the teacher performs the function of intellectual midwife. Teaching is midwifery. According to Aquinas, the teacher is a doctor. (This sounds more apt in contrast than it is, because the word ‘doctor’ does not mean physician; in the middle ages the physicians took it over). The word ‘doctor’ means ‘one who is possessed of doctrine’; *one who knows* is a doctor. That makes the contrast sharper, because Socrates in all his remarks about his function in teaching young men claims *not to know*. In the great dialogue the *Meno* this is perfectly clear. He doesn’t know where the discussion of virtue is going but he is able to lead it nevertheless. He knows what he is looking for. (He is looking for a definition of virtue and an answer to the question, can virtue be taught.) The question is clear. He is able to lead the discussion without—so he pretends at least—knowing the answer. In the *Theatetus* all this comes to explicit definition: when asked what his kind of teaching is he says, “I am

like a midwife.” It is the young man who is learning, who gives birth to ideas, in whom knowledge or understanding or insight is born. Ultimately the teacher’s task is only that of making the delivery easier; he is merely skilled in the process of acquiring ideas or of delivering them to oneself. The midwife is only a help in the process of giving birth, and the teacher is a midwife.

Opposed to this we find in the writings of Aquinas apparently a contrary view. I say, apparently; in one of the articles in the question on the teacher Aquinas appears to say (and you see how apt this would be) that the teacher knows actually what the student knows potentially, in good Aristotelian fashion. Teaching is therefore that action by the teacher which reduces the student from potentiality to actuality. There couldn’t be a prettier, simpler formula in contrast to the Socratic, for here is knowledge in the teacher, actual knowledge, and there the mere potentiality. It is like the heated object and the one which is only potentially hot, to which heat flows in the presence of the heated object. (The only difference would be that the heated object loses the heat, whereas the teacher, one supposes, in the act of reducing the student from potentiality to actuality does not himself cease to be an actual knower, though I suspect it could happen.)

I have often talked about these two contrasting views of the teacher—the knowing teacher and the inquiring teacher—as if they really were two different theories and radically opposed. But actually, upon a closer reading of what St. Thomas has to say about teaching and learning, St. Thomas doesn’t disagree with Socrates at all. There may be a slight change in emphasis, but there is really only one view. The most important distinction that Aquinas makes in his writing on the subject is the distinction between two modes of learning: learning by instruction and learning by discovery. He defines these as follows: one learns by discovery if one learns whatever one learns without the aid of a teacher. The use of one’s cognitive faculties upon the data of experience in the absence of a teacher is learning by discovery. But when you examine what St. Thomas means by instruction it becomes clear that the distinction is not as sharp as that between the teacher instructing and a person without a teacher doing the opposite, which is discovery. In fact, the best way to make the distinction is to distinguish between aided and unaided discovery. Aquinas makes it clear that the teacher is never the principal cause of the learning. The principal cause of learning is the reason or intellect of the learner. The teacher, says Aquinas, at his best is both dispensable and auxiliary—an instrumental cause, so that actually the instructor is not the principal or sole cause of learning but merely an assistant in the Socratic sense.

Learning without a teacher is unaided discovery; learning with a teacher is aided discovery. The teacher is at best a dispensable aid.

When I say that the teacher is a dispensable aid I want to be very clear. Everything that can be learned—everything any man can learn—can be learned without a teacher. Everything which is originally learned is learned in this way, as is perfectly obvious. Nothing originally learned is learned with a teacher by discovery. Now the only reason for teachers is the purely pragmatic reason that if everybody were left to himself to learn by unaided discovery without the very real help which teachers can give, no one would learn very much and would take too long to learn the things we have to learn. Hence, though the teacher is dispensable in the sense that he is never necessary, he is nevertheless pragmatically very useful, as Socrates says, to make the pain of learning lighter and to facilitate the process as in all the arts that work with nature, by expediting and regularizing it.

I want you to notice that if the teacher were, as is sometimes thought, not only the sole but even the principal cause of learning on the part of the instructed you would have what I call indoctrination: the doctor putting doctrine into the student as if the student were a plastic receptacle in strictly obediential potency, as in some sense the potter shapes the clay. If this were the case, indoctrination would be possible. But since by any sound analysis of the human mind the mind is not in obediential potency to the human teacher but is an active as well as ‘possible’ or passive power, indoctrination is impossible. When it looks as if anyone is indoctrinating anyone else, I assure you all that is happening is memorization. When you say, “He’s indoctrinated that fellow,” nothing has happened to the mind whatsoever. The mind can’t be indoctrinated. You can however make a parrot out of man and get verbal responses well memorized; this is possible. But this isn’t teaching or learning.

In instruction or aided discovery—as in unaided discovery—the activity of reason on the part of the student is always the principal cause; the teacher is at best a secondary, instrumental cause and a dispensable instrument. This being the case, one thing follows: the more the teacher makes the process of instruction imitate the process of discovery the greater his art as a teacher.

All I am saying here is what is said about art in general and particularly about those extraordinary arts, the co-operative arts. What is said about the arts in general (at least by the philosopher I respect most on this subject, Aristotle) is that the arts imitate nature.

In the three co-operative arts, which are the arts of healing, farming, teaching, the artist doesn't imitate nature in terms of a sensible similitude but works with nature, imitating the natural process. Thus, the Hippocratic physician watches the way the body heals itself and cooperates with the healing body. The skillful farmer watches the way that nature nourishes and helps plants grow, and cooperates with nature. So the teacher, just like the farmer and the healer, watches the way the human mind learns in the process of discovery unaided by teachers and aids it by imitating and using the arts of learning. This is teaching.

On all these points, apart from differences in imagery and apart from the fact that in one case we are talking in the language of Plato and in the other in the language of Aristotle, there really is no difference in the theory of the teacher. But two very interesting questions remain. One question is whether the teacher—apart from what the art of the teacher is—must know actually what the student has to learn. Or, must the teacher merely have greater expertness as a learner, that is, more skill in the liberal arts of learning? A second question is whether, even if he has the knowledge actually, the teacher should ironically pretend not to know in order to give the student the sense that he too is inquiring.

To the first question I should answer that to demand that the teacher actually know is to demand too great a perfection of the teacher, if by knowledge you really mean the truth. And let me say quickly on this point that as I look back at my own long career as a teacher I know that I was as effective a teacher when I was in error as when I was right. In fact I often think that the times when I was most vigorously committed to a wrong doctrine were the times when I taught most effectively. The truth is a hard thing to ask anyone to have in full measure; I don't think actually having the truth is the measure of a teacher. What I would demand of the teacher is not that he actually have the truth; the demand that takes the place of this would be that he have, rightly or wrongly, profound intellectual commitments and convictions. I wouldn't want to have an "open-minded" teacher—a teacher for whom anything was as right or as wrong as anything else. Whether one talks in terms of the Thomistic doctor or the Socratic inquirer, this requirement is common.

The second question is a little more subtle. Personally, I think that here Socrates is more right than Aquinas. All through the dialogues Socrates keeps pretending that he does not know and is not bothered by the fact that he is nevertheless teaching. The commentators on Plato always call this Socratic irony, because if you look at the

text in another way you see that there are a lot of things he really does know. He will say, for example, "I am sure that the unexamined life is not worth living." Then why does he keep pretending, ironically, not to know? My answer to that has something to do with the psychology or tactics of the teacher. This degree of irony, this pretense not to know, is required I think in order to bridge the gap between the teacher and the student, for the teacher can help the student only by actually engaging in the inquiry which the learner must attempt. Now it is preposterous to be inquiring when you really have the end of the inquiry, so you've got to pretend a little bit that it isn't too clear to you, that you still are inquiring; if the teacher doesn't inquire then he is not a good conductor and cannot aid the student's discovery. To stand there and *know* while the student is discovering is a bad posture. Even if in his heart he thinks he knows, he should with a certain kind of irony pretend not to know.

I would like to make two comments on this last point. Whenever the mind is fortunate enough to come into possession of any truth we say that the mind is assimilated to reality, to that which is. Truth is the adequation of intellect and thing, the correspondence or agreement of mind with reality. That agreement is a kind of assimilation. It isn't the reality that gets assimilated to the mind; it is the mind which becomes like the real. And it is this fact that misleads a great many people about what teaching is. They turn around and say that just as in learning the truth by discovery I make my mind like the real, so in teaching I make my student's mind like mine. It is natural to want to short-cut things. Why bother to have the student get in contact with reality directly if he can get in contact with your mind first of all?

This is an error. Teaching, whether you teach the truth or error (teachers do both), is not the assimilation of the student to the teacher. The concept of assimilation fits the theory of teaching as indoctrination: you can get students to repeat the words you use. In most classes all over the country and in all kinds of colleges at examination time this is what most students do—hand back to the teachers the words the teachers used and get graded according to proficiency in verbal memory. Usually this stuff is forgotten, and well it might be, as soon as the examination is over. It has nothing to do with learning at all. Nothing has happened to the mind. The concept of assimilation of student to teacher fits indoctrination but does not fit the theory that the teacher is an aid in the process of discovery.

The second comment I want to make here—with great feeling and



with some depth of experience—concerns a simple fact of life that most of us who have been engaged in teaching are almost bound to overlook. When this fact first hit me it almost ruined me; I think I gave up teaching when I faced this fact. Face it too clearly and you are paralyzed. It is the fact of distance between the mind of the teacher and the mind of the student.

Let me make this quite concrete. I was a graduate student in philosophy and psychology at the age of twenty; by the time I was thirty-five I had gone through a great many changes of mind. The things I came to understand by the age of thirty-five came out of a very elaborate process of purification, correction, refinement, fire and torture. I go into a classroom at the age of thirty-five—and it is worse when you are forty-five and worse when you are fifty-five—and here are these bright young faces at the age of eighteen and nineteen. I imagine I understand something, and I am going to try to make them understand it too. The ground I have traversed painfully, year by year, I am going to drag them over—but their feet aren't going to touch it. They are going to be saved all that I have been through, without any effort on their part! It is impossible. As you get older your understanding gets richer and deeper—not surer, necessarily, but more subtle and more qualified. The distance between the teacher and the student increases.

I say there are only two ways to bridge that gap. One is by shutting your eyes and giving lectures; this way you have a satisfied feeling because at least you have heard the sound of your own voice. The other way that gets harder as you get older, is to try really to teach: which means to pretend ironically that you are back there where the student is—actually to get yourself back there and learn with him. This is a very trying ordeal for a mature person.

Teaching as the process of facilitating discovery on the part of the learner requires a great effort of soul. It is a very charitable act on the part of the teacher to remove himself from where he is intellectually and somehow refashion his mind back to a point where he can stand with the student, look at his world and see it approximately from where the student stands. This is a trying and difficult thing to do.

But let me say that the teacher who does this, as the lecturer never can, may learn something in the process. In the last ten years of my teaching I had this experience enough times to know what it is. I still tried to teach, and I found that even on the subjects where I was most sure I often did learn something. And I would like to say that anyone who wants to teach has a simple criterion as to whether

he is succeeding, which he himself (and no one from the outside) can apply. It is not whether his students are learning anything, but whether he is learning something. As he leaves the classroom can he say to himself, “Today I learned a little; I saw something I hadn’t seen”? If he can, probably he has done the most effective teaching he could do. This is the surest sign. Any teacher who leaves the classroom in the same state of mind as when he came into it probably has not done very well.

This is a very high test, you understand; and so it happens very infrequently. Don’t suppose you teach every day in this effective way. If it happens five or six times a semester you’ve done well. It is a hard thing to do, and therefore you can’t ask to have it done regularly. There are many class sessions in which nothing very much happens to anybody.

A word about the attitude of students towards teachers. There are two virtues, one of which St. Thomas definitely connects with learning; the other he handles in a different treatise in which he is talking about prudence. In an essay I wrote in 1940, in the *Commonweal*, I appropriated what St. Thomas said about the second virtue and generalized it to the whole speculative life. The two virtues of the student are studiousness (*studiositas*) and docility (*docilitas*). For Aristotle and Aquinas, every virtue is a mean between extremes of opposed tendencies. Studiousness is a middle ground between lack of interest, apathy, and that immoderate craving to learn for the wrong reason, *curiositas*. Studiousness is handled by St. Thomas very simply as one of the virtues annexed to temperance.

Docility is much harder. Curiously enough, the word itself throws us off, though it is a virtue and, I think, the prime virtue of the student. The extremes between which it mediates are subservience and indocility or recalcitrance. Unfortunately most people use the word ‘docility’ in the sense of the extreme; they speak of a person as docile when they mean that he is submissive, lamb-like, subservient. But the extreme is a vice, not the virtue, just as recalcitrance or intransigence is a vice. Docility, that middle ground between the two, involves a critical use on the part of the student of the teacher as an instrument of learning. I am saying that the docile student *uses* the teacher. It is perfectly right for him to use the teacher because the teacher is an instrument. To use the teacher critically means that the student is neither submissive to his authority without active inquiry (since nothing is to be accepted on the authority of the teacher, nothing is to be memorized and parroted) nor resistant to the art or skill of the teacher showing him the way to learn.

His attitude is one of respect; he listens. What the teacher says just by virtue of his office is worth asking about to see whether it is true. What the teacher says is listened to respectfully as a challenge. Where the student is initially inclined to disagree, he should watch himself from becoming indocile and recalcitrant; where he is initially inclined to agree, he should guard against becoming submissive.

Let me go on now to my second point: the distinction between schooling and education. The Bachelor of Arts degree in the middle ages, as the meaning of ‘baccalaureate’ tells us, was the degree of an initiate. The person who was given the B.A. in the medieval school was a young man who, I assure you, was not certified as learned. That is the one thing in the world that he was not—not a doctor, not a master, not learned. All being a bachelor meant was that he had the skill of learning, that he was now able to learn and go on to become a master or a doctor. At the point of being a bachelor he had been initiated into the world of learning by being given the skills of learning. And what were these? These were the liberal arts: reading and writing and speaking and listening and observing and measuring and calculating. Nothing else, nothing more, nothing less. Anyone who can practice these arts well is skilled in learning. Anyone who cannot is not ready to start learning. This was the whole point of the baccalaureate.

When you understand this, you understand something that is profoundly important to understand, which I am sorry to say our twentieth century and our generation has forgotten. None of our ancestors misunderstood this. You can take all the theories of education from the Greeks down to the end of the nineteenth century and no one made the mistake we make. Our contemporaries, our teachers, our students, our parents—all of us think that education is something that happens in school. This is preposterous. It cannot happen there. Schooling is not education. Schooling is preparation for education. That is why I said let’s use those words carefully. Education cannot possibly be accomplished in school. No one in the past ever thought it could. No one thought that a boy graduated from school with a B.A. was an educated man, no one who understood that education consists in slowly, slowly becoming wise, acquiring a little understanding. No young man at the age of twenty could possibly be educated, no matter what kind of school he went to and what he did there. He could not possibly be wise or have much understanding or much insight. How could you talk about schooling as producing an educated man? The purpose of schooling is to prepare young people to go out of school and get an education thereafter.

The reason for this is not far to seek. It has nothing to do with whether the schools are good or bad. If the schools were the very best schools you could possibly imagine in Utopia and the students were all of them earnest, industrious, energetic and the brightest students you could imagine, it still wouldn't be true because the greatest and the most insuperable obstacle to becoming educated in school is youth; and that is what you have in school. You cannot educate young people. You cannot make them wise. Nothing will do that except a long life, much experience and much thought.

Actually if you look at the subjects of the curriculum there are only a few things that can be taught effectively to the young because they don't require much understanding or wisdom. You can teach them history and geography. You can teach them languages. You can teach them mathematics and empirical science. Mathematics is an ideal subject for the young; it is abstract, doesn't require any experience. The empirical sciences are something like that. The facts of history and geography are something like that. But there are certain subjects you cannot possibly teach well to the young, or even at all. They are the subjects that, just by their nature, the immature can't grapple with, can't become even reasonably proficient in. To name some of these subjects, I would say that they include the understanding of great poetry; ethics, politics, and practical wisdom; moral philosophy; certainly metaphysics and natural theology. These subjects are beyond the young.

Part two, next week.

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## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Gary Cleal, Belgium**

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**Mary Beth Shwayder**

***We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.***

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