THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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Inevitably, an individual is measured by his or her largest concerns. **—Norman Cousins**

Norman Cousins
(1915-1990)

THE GREAT BOOKIE

Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography

by Mortimer J. Adler

Reviewed by Norman Cousins

When I first learned that Mortimer Adler was writing his autobiography, with the emphasis on his intellectual development, I had a vision of a three-volume set, at least. He has been involved during his lifetime in a dozen or more major educational enterprises. He was one of the architects of the *Great Books of the*

Western World. He was involved with Robert M. Hutchins in the new educational design for the University of Chicago. He played a prominent role in establishing the intellectual program for the Aspen Institute in Colorado. He was a leading figure in bringing about a revolutionary change in the theory and practice of a modern encyclopedia (*Encyclopaedia Britannica).* He spent years classifying the main ideas of Western civilization. Each of these undertakings would have justified an entire book. What we have here, however, is the full range of all these experiences and undertakings in a single volume.

In the universe of ideas, nothing is more difficult to recreate than the perception of mind by itself. Yet Mortimer Adler has been able both to recapture the feelings he had during his various ventures and to stand outside himself while writing about them. He identifies the interactive influences that went into the making of a creatively disciplined mind. What is equally important, he has something of value to give the reader as the result of each of his experiences—deeper insights into the way ideas are born and take on substance and character; a fuller understanding of the art of intellectual persuasion; and a direct view of some of the giants of contemporary thought: how they reason, how they get things done or fail to get things done.

It is futile to speculate whether Adler has had greater influence as a teacher, as a philosopher, or as an editor. Futile, because all the strands form a single skein. He is a thinker and teacher who obviously regards systematic thought as a value second only to life itself. All his intellectual activities, whether in the classroom or in his study, are directed to the pursuit of knowledge through disciplined thought. He has served as a consultant for an impressive number of colleges and universities that were interested in curriculum reform. To each of them, he has advanced a series of negative conditions as "prerequisite to any reform aimed in the right direction":

- There should be no vocational training of any sort.
- There should be no electives, no majors or minors, no specialization in subject matter.
- There should be no division of the faculty into professors competent in one department of learning rather than another.

- No member of the faculty should be unprepared to teach the course of study as a whole.

- No textbooks or manuals should be assigned as reading material for the students.

- Not more than one lecture a week should be given to the student body.

- There should be no written examinations.

What is left—what is possible—after these seven conditions are met? Adler feels, and he is right, that the process leads almost automatically to positive values: the replacement of departmentally divided professors by a community of fellows and tutors obligated to teach everything required of the students; the replacement of written examinations by oral examinations; the replacement of inferior textbooks and manuals; and so on.

Adler recognizes that the seven conditions tend to lose validity in direct proportion to the size of the educational institution. Once, at Stanford University, where he advanced his thesis, he was asked a simple question by the dean: "Dr. Adler, if we were to comply with these conditions, what would you recommend that we do in a college that enrolls seven thousand students?" Adler had been so caught up in the concept of a small college that he says he sat "in stunned silence until I could summon the wit to apologize for not having inquired in the first place about the size of the student body." Wryly, he also acknowledged that "no flourishing institution could be expected to turn the somersaults" that his program demanded.

Adler gives less ground when confronted with the criticism that his ideas are slavishly Aristotelian. He admits he feels that philosophy reached its high point with Aristotle and that he has learned very little from modern philosophers. Almost all the philosophical truths he came to know and understand, he says, are derived first of all from Aristotle, then from Aquinas, a student of Aristotle, or from Jacques Maritain, a student of both Aristotle and Aquinas.

"It is certainly possible to be an Aristotelian," Adler says, "or the devoted disciple of some other philosopher, without also being a blind and slavish adherent of his views, declaring with misplaced piety that he is right in everything he says, never in error, or that he has cornered the market on truth and is in no respect deficient or defective."

This statement is certainly crisp and explicit enough, but it is not likely to satisfy those who feel he has passed too lightly over the contributions of thinkers such as Kant or Hegel or Maimonides or Descartes or, more recently, Kierkegaard, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Rousseau, and, most particularly, John Dewey.

The debate over Adler as an Aristotelian is not particularly pertinent or useful, any more than was the charge a quarter-century ago that he allowed the names of famous men long dead to dominate contemporary education, or that he has failed to pay adequate attention to non-Western thought. He has defined his own context and has lived within it. With Robert Hutchins, he held fast to the importance of the liberal arts at a time when functionalism and science threatened to bring about serious discontinuities in modern education.

Many years ago, Mortimer Adler advised people to write in the margins of book pages. He knew he was running directly counter to all the strictures of a proper literary upbringing, but he felt nonetheless that the place to record reactions is at the site of the stimulus. He said that the more worthy the book, the greater the reason for a reader to write in its margins. By this yardstick, *Philosopher at Large* should be one of the most marked up books of the year. 🕮

Published in Saturday Review*, September 3, 1977.*

Norman Cousins was an Adjunct Professor of Medical Humanities at the University of California and a prominent world federalist leader. He was executive editor (and then editor-in-chief) of the *Saturday Review of Literature*; under his leadership, circulation increased from 20,000 to 650,000. Cousins later served as President of the World Federalist Association. He is the author of many books.

Truth in Religion: The Plurality in Religions and the Unity of Truth

by Mortimer J. Adler

Reviewed by Matthew Scully

READERS of *Aristotle for Everybody*, *Ten Philosophical Mistakes*, or any other of his thirty books know Mortimer J. Adler as an even-tempered fellow, always the firm but patient taskmaster helping us to think straight. Propositions are adduced, major and minor premises advanced, exceptions allowed for, objections anticipated, and conclusions stated in the most qualified and precise language. Everyone, Professor Adler assumes, is as eager for truth and clarity as he is; and if certain modern thinkers have gone astray, he attributes this to an innocent misreading of Mill or Rousseau. You find yourself sometimes wishing he'd drop the Thomistic calm and consider less honorable motives. But maybe this is what makes him the philosopher and us the pupils.

His new book, *Truth in Religion*, affords an example of what sort of argument does make Professor Adler impatient. This comes in reply to the late Joseph Campbell's widely noted six-hour interview with Bill Moyers on PBS, entitled *The Power of Myth*. Professor Campbell, as those who endured the interview or subsequent book will recall, had an Emersonian gift for casting atheism in the language of faith: "God is the manifestation of energy--not the source. All religions are misunderstood mythologies," uplifting metaphors reflecting the "potentialities" within. One waited and waited for Mr. Moyers to elicit a frank and unequivocal, "Bill, there is no God," so that the philosophical import of that position could be examined. Instead, the series ended with Mr. Moyers thanking his subject for "liberating my faith from the cultural prisons to which it had been sentenced."

Alas for Mr. Moyers, reading *Truth in Religion* he'll discover his sentence is not quite up yet, and it's going to take more than Professor Campbell's "potentialities" to spring him. Professor Campbell's idea of a solid argument, counters Professor Adler, was to cite various pre-Christian cultures having Christ-like figures or notions of redemption and salvation. These are historically interesting but not logically relevant. Indeed, he writes, "What these many similar myths make manifest is something common to the human race as a whole: mankind's sense of its delinquency and the inadequacy of its powers to raise itself up from its earthly condition. . . " Nor will it do to say merely that God's existence cannot be established through reason. One must then prove the contrary, contends Professor Adler, or else reserve final judgment. Dogmatic materialism is "as unprovable as any article of religious faith."

Professor Campbell dispensed with, *Truth in Religion* then picks up a line of argument Professor Adler began in *How to Think about God*. In that 1980 essay, he rejected traditional proofs of God's existence by Augustine and Aquinas, but persuasively advanced a somewhat idiosyncratic argument of his own. We are warranted in believing in some efficient, independent cause that created and now sustains the universe, the book concluded, but pure reason can take us only that far. The personal God of the Old and New Testaments is plausible, but not provable; whereas an abstract Creator is provable "beyond a reasonable doubt."

A simple deduction follows, Professor Adler contends. If logic establishes the existence of one God Who created and sustains the universe, then all contrary theologies are false. It may seem a parochial, harshly illiberal position, he writes, but there is no getting around it. To prove the validity of our conception of God is to dis-

prove the theologies of (for instance) Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism.

Not only ought other cultures to affirm our idea of one God, asserts Professor Adler: implicitly they have done so already. All cultures have now adopted Western science and technology. They therefore have also accepted the mathematics and logic underlying these systems. Without even knowing it, observes Professor Adler, Eastern societies have affirmed the transcultural validity of Western rules of thought. And these same rules—the methods by which we present or refute evidence, expose contradictions, and establish proofs of varying degrees of philosophical certitude—would also lead them to our notion of God.

This means, his argument continues, that they are left with no logical choice but to own up to the internal contradictions of their theologies. As it is, Eastern religious doctrines not only tolerate contradiction but embrace it. Professor Adler's word for this is "Averroism," from the Arabic philosopher Averrois' proposition that faith and reason co-exist in distinct "logic-tight compartments," neither consorting with the other. Intellectually and spiritually, writes Professor Adler, this inconsistency is not to be encouraged. "If Averroism is wrong in the West, it cannot be right in the East."

Of course our Averroist friends have a second option: they can ignore Professor Adler's sure-fire syllogism and go right on with their perplexing ways, with or without his philosophical imprimatur. But Professor Adler says we ought to press the point anyway. It is neither desirable nor inevitable, he believes, that humanity should order itself forever under incompatible theologies.

A reasonable enough proposition, and yet in the last few pages an odd note intrudes. We find Professor Adler insisting his insights are crucial to the "great new epoch" unfolding before us. This millennium "will not begin until there is a universal acknowledgment of the unity of truth in all areas of culture to which the standard of truth is applicable; for only then will men be able to live together peacefully in a world cultural community under one government. Only then will world civilization and world history begin."

No doubt after sixty years of educating mankind—about the stretch of Professor Adler's career—one begins to look for the results in new epochs and universal acknowledgments of truth. It doesn't seem a very philosophical expectation, and were this anyone but

Mortimer Adler one could dismiss it as a rhetorical flourish, especially that bit about world civilization just now beginning. But let the point go--it's not essential to his case.

If "unity of truth" is worth pursuing, it is not for the benefit of those confounded Averroists, who will just have to sort out their own problems, but for ourselves. No great new epoch in man's search for unity is coming, regardless of whether Logic demands it. But it would be impressive enough if Professor Adler's book could teach one earnest believer like Bill Moyers not to sit enthralled as his faith is subtly mocked, or thank his mocker for the favor.

How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan

by Mortimer J. Adler

Reviewed by Matthew Scully

CHAOS? Few of us are likely to dust off Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, or the *Proslogium,* for extended reflection on their various arguments for belief in God. We're in luck, though, because we have Mortimer J. Adler to do some of the work for us. Newly re-issued, Mr. Adler's *How to Think about God: A Guide for the 20th-Century Pagan* (Collier, 175 pp., $7.95) leads step to step to the conviction, "I have reasonable grounds for affirming God's existence." Beyond this "philosophy cannot go," writes Mr. Adler, author of a mere 46 other books, but along the way one is reminded that reasoning too can be an act of piety. And, maybe because the trait is so rare, there's something endearing in his methodical, assume-nothing approach to argumentation—as when he distinguishes between proper nouns by noting that his cat is named "Thomas Aquinas": Even when the creature is "not visibly present and I use that name to call him to me, I know that I am not summoning a medieval theologian to reappear on earth." Ergo, "without direct acquaintance" we too may henceforth use the name to mean "a cat that has now been identified as the pet of Mortimer Adler, the author of this book." Rigorous standards of proof in the spirit of Aquinas (the medieval theologian, not the Thomistic tabby) do not confirm the publisher's claim that the book is "now available for the first time in paperback"—a 1982 Bantam edition

is sitting in front of me. But this is the only imprecision the reader will encounter. 🕮

Matthew Scully served until August 2004 as special assistant to the president and deputy director of presidential speechwriting. A former literary editor of *National Review*, his work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *The National Post of Canada*, among other newspapers and magazines. He is the author of *Dominion: The Power of Man, The Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (St. Martin's Press), named by *The Atlantic Monthly* as one of the ten best nonfiction works of 2002.

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J. Kenneth Hurley

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