

## IN MEMORIAM

104th Anniversary of  
Mortimer J. Adler's Birth



December 28, 1902 - June 28, 2001

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**What's Wrong  
What's Right  
With Today's America**



Interview with  
Dr. Mortimer J. Adler

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## “WE HAVE FAILED COMPLETELY” TO TEACH CHILDREN TO THINK

**Q** Dr. Adler, is there any difference in the way people are behaving morally today, and the way they behaved in the past?

**A** In outward manners and customs, yes. But if you are asking whether in any generation there are more men who violate the simplest moral principles, whether there are more scoundrels, my answer is no.

**Q** Why is it that you hear growing complaints about laxity in public and private morals?

**A** Any generation of human beings will contain the same human potentialities. The differences in human behavior result from what you surround that population with—the amount of power that is put into the hands of some people, the controls that are exercised on human conduct, the institutions you give them, the opportunities you give them. They will appear to behave differently because of the surrounding circumstances, though in fact the human material will be about the same.

**Q** Are things like television creating wrong attitudes? What about crime programs, other kinds of entertainment people are getting?

**A** Advertisers are paying for the time to sell their products. They want a mass audience, which is not supplied by educational or public-service shows. You ask, “Whose fault is it that you can’t get a mass audience for such shows?” Well, it is not the advertisers’ fault. If anything, it’s the fault of American education.

**Q** The problem rests with people themselves—what they will accept?

**A** Yes.

**Q** Is education supposed to build moral fiber?

**A** Yes. There’s a lot of talk, you know, that schools are responsible for training the moral character of their students as well as giving them intellectual training. But it’s always seemed to me that the question is put the wrong way. You cannot create a good stu-

dent except by creating a morally virtuous student.

**Q** In what way?

**A** Let's ask what it means to be a good student. Here is a child who is given the opportunity to do the hard job of studying, or the easy job of playing. All the enticements of youth—cars, football games, parties, drinking—surround him. Now, if he yields to these, he will not have as much time as he needs to study well. Hence, when you find a good student, you have found a morally virtuous child.

**Q** It's not just a matter of basic intelligence, then?

**A** Oh, no. I have met many children whose intellectual capacity would permit them to be good students, but whose moral laxity prevents them from being good students because of the way they use their time.

**Q** Does that affect their attitudes outside school?

**A** That's the worst of it. I've often thought that one of the most potent causes of juvenile delinquency is that the present high school does not work any of its children hard enough. The bright children get away with doing almost nothing—they don't have to study to get good grades. And the duller ones know that they will be passed, anyway, because they have to be promoted. Few people are flunked out of high school. As a result, all the children have a very easy time of it.

**Q** Do they then have time for getting into trouble?

**A** Yes. A child at that age is energetic and ingenious. His mind, his ingenuity, his energy are not being taxed by study. Well, he has to have an outlet somewhere. Much of our delinquency doesn't come from the slum areas—it comes from children who are trying to find something to do. They're inventing a way of life for themselves.

**Q** At one time youngsters went to work at an early age.

**A** If there's any reason why there is more juvenile delinquency today, it's that there are more children in high school who are not occupied full time with their studies. A hundred years ago, when boys went to work at 14 or earlier, and worked 12 to 14 hours a day, they didn't have any time for delinquency.

**Q** Don't youngsters learn to work in college?

**A** I doubt if 10 per cent of the college population in the United States works 40 hours a week. Add up the number of hours a student spends in class—assuming that he's attentive and not asleep—and the number of hours he spends in the library and at a desk, and I would guess that less than 10 per cent work much more than 30 hours a week. That's not enough for an energetic boy or girl to put in.

**Q** Do youngsters carry those standards of work with them into later life—as plumbers or clerks or salesmen?

**A** That's right. In our generation, there are many educators who say that school should “prepare for life.” I agree with them. Now what is life? Is it mainly significant work, or is it play? Anyone's understanding of human life is that the main job a man has to do is to grow, improve himself, make a contribution to society, as well as earn a living. All of this is work—leisure work or subsistence work. If this is so, then the only way the schools can prepare a child for life is to start him working at the age of 6. From 6 on, the child should be given a full burden of work and kept at it. That is the way to prepare a child for life. Of course, if life is to be a round of frolic and fun, then what the schools are doing now is “preparing for life.” I think it is a dreadful picture.

**Q** A youngster gets out of school without working very hard, so his idea is to get through life the same way—

**A** That is precisely it.

### **HOW PARENTS CAN HELP—**

**Q** What about the parents? This idea of education has been going on for many years. Is their outlook affected?

**A** It's a vicious circle. You have no idea how much protest comes from parents when teachers try to increase homework. Why is this so? The answer is that, if the children have considerable homework, the evening hours of parents in the home are interfered with. The child should be able to go to his parents for some help with respect to difficult problems. But this interferes with the relaxed state of affairs in the home, and the parents would rather not be troubled by it.

**Q** Is that true of all parents?

**A** I'm not saying this is true of all parents, but it's true of a great many. And a great many American parents are incredibly sentimental about childhood. "Why should Johnny have to work so hard?" they ask. This silly sentimentality about children is bad for the children, bad for our society, bad for the school system, bad all along the line.

**Q** Are people being equipped intellectually to handle their problems today?

**A** If you consider schooling up through high school, the main change is that our children are simply less well trained than they were in the schools of earlier centuries. They cannot read as well. They cannot write as well. They cannot think as well. They are not as well disciplined in the actual processes of study and learning.

**Q** Aren't there exceptions?

**A** Oh, in every generation there are some good students. There always will be—the worst school system in the world can't prevent that. But, by and large, in relative numbers—I'm speaking on the basis of what I know from teaching in college and seeing the product of the American high school—I think it has grown much worse.

**Q** Did that come with mass education?

**A** What educators should have faced is this hard question: How do you do for those whose educational aptitude is low exactly what you do for the most gifted in proportion to their capacity?

Let me illustrate this very simply: In gymnastics, if you had children of different strengths and heights, and you thought that chin-ning the bar was a good exercise for the development of muscles and co-ordination, would you set the bar at the same height for all the children? No. You would set it for children of different groups at different heights. Would you be doing the same thing for all children with this bar set at different heights? Yes. You'd be doing exactly the same.

Now what I'm saying is this: If Greek and Latin, algebra and calculus, history and physics, and the great books are the subjects which stretch the intellectual muscles of the brightest child and give him the skill and training he needs, then we either have to find or invent materials which do exactly the same things in proportion to the capacity of the weaker child. Not something different—the same things.

**Q** Does every child need that training—even if he becomes a manual laborer?

**A** If stretching the child's mind and making him use it for learning and thinking is the function of education, then you must do it for every child who is not in an asylum, who is going to become a citizen, who is going to rear children, who is going to have to hold a job of some kind, who is going to have more free time than he knows what to do with. And that is where we have failed completely.

**Q** Is that a growing problem?

**A** Let me put the matter this way: It would take the most extraordinary reforms, a complete recasting of our whole school system from the kindergarten through college, to prepare most of tomorrow's children to use their opportunities well. Their opportunities are too rich. The thing that is frightening to me is that we progressively improve the institutions and the conditions of our lives—

**Q** Is that a bad thing?

**A** I don't think there is any question that all these improvements and advances are good. Technological advances substitute machines for human labor. The freeing of human time from drudgery and toil is of unquestionable goodness. The reduction of menial labor to almost zero is wonderful. The opportunity that everybody has for travel, for recreation, for study—everything we have done institutionally and externally is good for men. But human beings—are they prepared for these good things? Can a society have institutions and conditions too good for the human beings in it? The answer is "Yes, it can." Not too good for their natures, but too good for those natures as trained.

**Q** Is there any answer to that problem?

**A** We are a million miles away from the kind of training that would be required to make our total population worthy of the institutions we have created. I don't believe we can create it in less than 150 or 200 years. Certainly the kind of thing I'm talking about cannot be done in a five-year reform.

**Q** Are you saying that more education is needed?

**A** Oh, much more. Actually, what is required is universal liberal schooling. And I mean liberal through and through—not an ounce

of vocational training from the kindergarten through college, but liberal schooling for all children up through the bachelor of arts degree. That, plus some kind of publicly sustained liberal education for all adults throughout their lives. This is my notion of the educational burden that our society must discharge.

**Q** Why is that?

**A** Let's suppose for a moment that there will never be a thermonuclear war. Let your imagination run as follows:

Let the Atlantic and the Pacific walls of this country be sky high. Imagine ourselves as isolated, economically self-sufficient, able to make progress at the rate we have been making it in all technological fields.

Now, in 150 or 200 years, the work load should be—for those who work at all—about 20 hours a week, and I would say we ought to have something like 25 million unemployed. All the wealth we would then need could be produced by a society in which those who worked at it did so 20 hours a week and for not more than 30 years of their lives.

Under such conditions, if education, both in and out of schools, were to remain as it is now, that society would destroy itself, out of the misuse of its time, because of the degradations and corruptions that would have to ensue just from sheer boredom. You know, free time is like a vacuum—it has to be filled, in good ways or bad ways, but it has to be filled. People can't sleep it all away.

**Q** Does this problem of free time affect everyone?

**A** The people who have the least free time are the leaders, the men at the top of the corporations, the professions, and in political life. Most of them work much more than 40 hours a week. By "work" I'm talking about all forms of it—both work to produce wealth and work to produce the goods of civilization. I would say that our leading citizens work 60 hours a week or more.

This is all right, because their work is good work. Sixty hours a week of drudgery is dreadful. But where you learn something and you contribute something by working, there is nothing wrong with 60 hours of it. It is when you come down to those of less ability that it becomes more and more important to provide the means of using their free time well. We don't have to worry about the fellows at the top. They haven't got much free time. They never will.

**Q** Are most people getting more free time than they know how to handle?

**A** Yes. They've been educated in schools where work was talked down rather than talked up, where study was something you got out of rather than got into. They live in a society where all the proliferated amusement industries bid for the use of their free time, and they have no resistance to the enticements.

**Q** Isn't there such a thing, then, as too much prosperity?

**A** No, no. There's nothing wrong with affluence. The affluent society we have is a fine thing.

**Q** It's what man does in an affluent society that counts?

**A** That's right.

**Q** Yet, back in the 1930s, didn't the depression seem to stiffen the backbone of people?

**A** In general, as we look back on it, we think it had a good effect. But there's a reason for that, you see. Adversity is often easier on the moral character than good fortune is. That is, if you have any guts at all, you can stand up to adversity more easily than you can resist good fortune.

**Q** People, then, respond to challenges.

**A** Yes. In general, men fight better when they're kicked than when they're pampered.

**Q** Some people say another depression might be a good thing for Americans.

**A** Perhaps, but that isn't a good solution.

**Q** Why not?

**A** It wouldn't be a solution, because a depression causes too much misery of a kind that you don't want to have. It isn't a good state of affairs in itself, even though it has some good by-products accidentally. The real problem is to learn how to live with prosperity.

There's a wonderful statement by the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius on this point, in the *Meditations*. Aurelius, with no comment, just says: "*It is possible to live well, even in a palace.*" The



implication is clear. It is not too hard to “live well” if you’re a slave or an underling, because you’ve got to. But, given all the enticements and comforts of a palace, said Aurelius, it is difficult but possible to live well even there.

**Q** You once stated that “philosophy is everybody’s business.” Are people really interested in philosophy?

**A** I think so. From time to time, I have engaged people, in all walks of life, in philosophical conversations—taxi drivers, porters, businessmen. We talk about the great questions—the purpose of life, the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, free will, good and bad societies, moral right and wrong. The basic questions interest everybody.

**Q** Can they understand such questions?

**A** If you talk the kind of repulsive jargon that is talked in philosophy classes, no one is interested. But, if you talk the common sense with which philosophy begins, no one turns away.

**Q** Do people ask questions?

**A** They always have. I’m a firm believer in the opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. He says, “All men by nature desire to know.” This is a universal impulse. In most children, it gets crushed out. Or society turns our attention away from it. But I would say that the desire to know is stronger than the desire to eat, except when a man is starving.

**Q** But don’t some philosophers say you can’t settle questions of “right” and “wrong” by discussion.

**A** Well, there are the logical positivists whose point of origin is in the philosophy of David Hume. He dismissed all speculative philosophy as so much loose talk and unverifiable opinion.

The positivists are mathematical logicians who think that the job of the philosopher is the patient analysis of what human beings mean when they say something. When you ask, “Now, what is the truth about the way things are? What is man? What should he do?” they reply: “That’s something to be solved by empirical science. All we can do is examine what men say.”

Positivism is the dominant theory that is now being taught in our philosophy classes. In addition, our college students are taught in anthropology or sociology—most professors of social science are

moral skeptics—that there are no objective principles in morality, that there is no way to establish what is right or wrong. If a tribe practices cannibalism, it is wrong by our standards, but not by that tribe’s standards. So they leave college with the view that all morals are a matter of opinion.

**Q** Has this affected the moral outlook of people?

**A** I want to be careful about that. If you say that it affects the general state of our mentality, the answer is yes. If you then ask if it affects the general level of our conduct, my answer is I don’t know. This mentality is not, in my opinion, an admirable mentality, but I don’t think it means that more men than before act badly.

**Q** Can an adult start educating himself?

**A** Yes—that is not only possible, but necessary. In my view, it is adult learning that is the most important part of education. Let me say it in another way: If the schools were as good as they could be, if every child got the very best liberal schooling from kindergarten through college in proportion to his capacity, it would still be necessary for everyone to do most of his learning in adult life.

**Q** Why?

**A** Children can be trained to learn and prepared for learning, but they cannot achieve much understanding or insight, and certainly they can attain no wisdom. As long as you’re a child, you’re inexperienced, you’re not serious, you’re not stable, you have no depth, and, in the absence of all the qualities that go with maturity, not very much that is important can be learned.

You can’t expect a child really to understand *War and Peace* or *The Divine Comedy* or *Faust* or *The Iliad*. You can’t expect the great works of moral and metaphysical philosophy to be grasped by children. They can pass examinations, they can hand you back the words, but they’re childish in their understanding—because they are children.

To get much depth of understanding and even a modicum of wisdom requires continued learning, mainly after 40, and certainly after 35.

**Q** Are many people doing this?

**A** Some. At the top level of American life we do have such things as the executive seminars which are held at Aspen, Colorado—

nine in the summertime and three in the wintertime—and we get top business and professional men from all over the country to go there for two weeks.

Now that is not very long, and in one sense it's a very narrow course of reading. It consists of 12 sessions and 12 assignments, with the reading mainly in the basic political and economic papers that relate to the two basic institutions of our society—democracy and capitalism.

**Q** How do these executives feel about it?

**A** What fascinates me is to hear these presidents, vice presidents and other executives of corporations admitting that this is the first time in years that they have read material like this. They regard it as tough to read. It is, but not too tough to read—it's just tight and well reasoned, instead of the slop they've been reading, or the technical stuff they don't really read but glance at.

In the course of those two weeks, they realize how rusty their minds are. They suppose that they've been “thinking” in their jobs; but, in fact, most executives don't have to do much “thinking” to solve the routine problems that come before them. They've got habits and rules of thumb for doing that.

**Q** Are these problems found just in the United States?

**A** Here alone, but only to the extent that we are technologically more advanced and also politically more democratic. Every other country will face the same problem in proportion as it becomes industrially developed and politically democratic.

## **REASONS FOR OPTIMISM—**

**Q** Do you see any hope for a solution?

**A** I'm really an optimist. I think the problem will have to be solved, because the alternative is so desperate.

**Q** How will it be solved?

**A** I don't know the circumstances—I guess my faith is something like that of De Tocqueville's, that the movement of the world toward democracy is almost a providential one. The movement of the world toward industrialism is equally providential. Taking the proposition that all men are by nature equal, which I do take to be true, these advances, political democracy and the freeing of human

time so that men can have equal opportunity to live well, are so intrinsically right that it seems to me incredible that men should not be able to make good use of them.

In other words, that we should have produced these right things and then fail to make a right use of them seems to me—well, my faith is that we can't fail on this.

So I really am an optimist, though perhaps I'm a bleak optimist. I don't see how it's going to happen, but I believe that it's going to happen. 📖

*Published in U.S. News & World Report, February 22, 1960 in the section "What's Wrong - What's Right With Today's America."*

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### EDITOR'S NOTE

On the occasion of his 95th birthday, I gave him an original issue of a New York Sun (where his career started) dated December 28, 1902.

The next day, I asked him what he thought of it. He said that he read it carefully and was disappointed not to find the announcement of his birth.

That was the Maestro, as I will always remember him . . .



*We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.*

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## THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Marie E. Cotter, Editorial Assistant

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.