



REAPPRAISAL

Mortimer Adler as Philosopher: A Criticism and an Appreciation

Charles Hartshorne

In the career of Robert Maynard Hutchins as administrator and writer, two things stand out—wit and courageous, adventurous idealism. No matter how funny (or irritating) Hutchins' remarks might be, no one has ever doubted his seriousness and his will to improve education, including adult education, in the light of the highest ideals available. The background is Protestant piety, and I recall a fine example of how this could combine with the wit: once in a lavatory at the University of Chicago where Hutchins was then chancellor, a scientific friend of mine, who knew something

about the theological subject matter of some of my writings, asked me, "Hartshorne, are you still working on God?" Before I could think of an answer, the deep voice of Hutchins, who happened to be standing close by, answered for me, "He ought to let God work on him."

Among those who have been closely associated with Dr. Hutchins, Mortimer Adler is one of those who have been there early, and late and all along. Moreover, Adler represents or parallels the serious side of Hutchins, I incline to think, more adequately than anyone else. And whereas Hutchins has always seen the importance of philosophy and has had more than casual acquaintance with the subject, Adler has all along been a philosopher, and a distinguished one. Then too, he has grown intellectually, and more than just intellectually, to a degree that I find indeed admirable. And I take the best of all his books to be the most recent one, *The Common Sense of Politics*.

In this article I shall be able to do but scant justice to all that this man has accomplished. For instance, I do not own and have scarcely used *Great Books of the Western World* or *The Great Ideas* (the *Syntopicon*). When the plan of the latter was announced and my opinion asked, I replied, half jokingly: "It seems to me an excellent instrument for the perpetuation of ancient errors." What I meant, so far as I really meant what I said, was that by going through all the centuries for the opinions of men of genius, omitting those still living, one is likely to give ways of thinking that have been made more or less irrelevant by intellectual progress greater prominence than they deserve. There was also the objection that in all this work only the Occident, not the Orient, was represented. Nevertheless, these are great achievements.

As director of the Institute for Philosophical Research, Adler has used substantial sums of money for a research team to investigate philosophical issues. The first of the resulting books, and the only one I have studied with care, is *The Idea of Freedom*, Volume I.

I find this an excellent introduction to the entire history of thought about this topic. Three basic procedures are distinguished and various versions of each set forth: (1) One may seek to provide for freedom by taking human volition to be an exception to the general principle of causal determinism otherwise obtaining in nature. (2) One may insist that strict determinism is universally valid, even in application to human behavior, but argue that this does not contradict freedom in the meaningful sense of unconstrained voluntary action. (3) One may hold that unqualified classical deter-

minism, as in Laplace, is nowhere literally true, and that human freedom is merely a high level, intensive case of the general principle that causal regularity is never absolute, in application to individual or singular and concrete events or actions, but is always only approximate (or statistical).

I am cited, rightly, as holding this third view, along with Whitehead, Peirce, and others. I do not know how to estimate whether the money spent in producing this work (and several others like it—on *Justice, Happiness and Love*) was well spent or not. Most books, including most great books, resulted from more modest outlays. But surely the method of team work in research needed to be tried in philosophy, and for all I know the results justify the corporate means taken to produce them.

In *The Conditions of Philosophy* Adler shows his extraordinary breadth of knowledge of the subject, both in its (Western) history and its present state. He rightly defends the view that philosophy is concerned with more than language, rather with the quite general data of experience, those not requiring special apparatus or a special locus in the world to make them accessible. This was also Charles Peirce's view.

In this book, which, like all his works, is admirable for its neat and vigorous style, Adler defends a "commonsense" realism of individual "substances," and ingeniously tries to dispose of the physicists' rejection of substance at the particle level by quoting Heisenberg on the merely potential status of particles. Whatever the success of this tactic, the concept—before Whitehead, radically avoided only by Buddhists—of substances as the final units or singulars of nature seems at best needless in natural science and worse than needless in philosophy. So far from events being mere adjectives of substances, the idea of substance is merely a (very important) way of expressing the natures and relationships of events. (The argument cannot be gone into here. It is set forth in my most recent work, *Creative Synthesis*.)

The acceptance of substance as the ultimate unit of reality, in Adler's case, as in the history of philosophy in general, brings with it a theory of enlightened self-interest as the basis of moral obligation. Of all those who have taken this path in ethics, from Plato and Aristotle to Thomas Aquinas and later philosophers, Adler (in *The Time of Our Lives: The Ethics of Common Sense*) is perhaps the most nearly satisfying. (Michael Scriven is also good.) Each man desires and should seek "a good life for himself," and his obligation to be just to others springs from the fact that a just society

is necessary to his own achievement of such a life. Adler admits, however, that religious beliefs or divine grace may qualify this reduction of altruism to a form of self-interest; and also that love (which cannot be obligated, secularly speaking) may to some extent lead a person to act directly for the sake of another.

By a good life Adler means one in which, in due proportions, all real or natural, rather than merely fancied, needs or desires are fulfilled. A basic need is for the individual to grow mentally and spiritually, to learn, and to cultivate his capacities as a person. Moreover, a good life is one that is good as a whole; it is no mere succession of “good times” or pleasures, although pleasure belongs in it. Much wisdom is embodied in this description of the good life. Enlightened self-interest cannot easily be better characterized. But there is a curious paradox: No life, says Adler, is definitely good until it reaches its end, until “the job is finished.” Until then the life is not good or happy, it is only becoming so. It is admitted that at no time will the man possess the goodness of his life as a whole, for, when the job is finished, the man is no longer there to enjoy it. The picture is complete and well painted—for whom?

In contrast, the nonsubstance philosopher will say that each moment of life is, first of all, its own end, good in itself in some degree; second, it is a contribution to the future of life—whose life? All life in a position to receive the contribution. This includes one’s own personal future and human posterity, obviously; beyond that the question becomes religious. Belief in God can, and I think should, be taken to mean that the definitive contribution is to the divine life. If one’s entire life should be a beautiful whole, this is finally for the value of this whole for the One who alone will survey it in its concrete details. However this may be, to value oneself simply as oneself, and not as an example of humanity, is to value subrationally. Therefore we need no further reason for valuing others than for valuing self. Love is not identity, $A = A$, but rather unity in contrast, and this can be our relation not only to ourselves, as at other times, but to other persons. Adler does admit that we may “identify ourselves” with another. But the rational way to do this is to universalize the principle. And then self-love is merely a special form of altruism. Always there is more than mere identity, and less than mere nonidentity. Only momentary selves, are simply nonidentical, I now and you now. In a little time our future selves will inherit from each other’s past selves, and there will be partial identity.

Adler may be largely right that those who reject enlightened self-

interest are likely to be meddlesome do-gooders or mere sentimentalists. But this only shows that the truth can be misused. Obviously we cannot equally influence and intelligently benefit all individuals; primary obligations are to those we can most effectively influence and whose needs we can most adequately grasp. Equally obviously, one's own career is normally the one a person is in the best position to influence intelligently for good. I see no priority of self-interest beyond this. It is our animality, not our rationality that makes it difficult to see the lives of others as of direct concern to us, so far as we can knowingly influence them. If I am mistaken in all this, then Adler's theory of morals is, for all I know, as good as any. As he suggests, it is Aristotle brought up to date and improved.

One final objection: Is it not a "natural need" of a thinking animal to see a meaning to life transcending death, a goal that, when attained, does not vanish into a soon-to-be-forgotten limbo? Also, a goal that is as universal as reason itself?

A number of technical questions about ethics and meta-ethics, about relativity and absoluteness in ethics, are excellently handled in this work. Adler shows, I think, that much that is thought to be new in current controversy is old, and that some fashionable views were refuted long ago.

In *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (a fine title!) Adler tackles the question of human equality as a politico-social ideal. He thinks that if the difference between man and the lower animals is taken as merely one of degree, then the value of the distinction, for moral and political purposes, is lost. But is it? The distinctive power of man is, of course, the symbolic power—the ability to form concepts, and thereby to achieve a certain freedom from instinct in making choices. Other animals, Adler argues, have no such power. But this suggests endless and politically irrelevant controversy. Quite recently two chimpanzees have been doing what looks wonderfully like learning a primitive sort of visual language in which appear symbols that seem to function both as words and, in combination, as sentences. However, this probably only shows, at most, that the higher apes may reach the level of tiny children in concept formation. They would still be far below the level at which they could function politically as citizens or officeholders. In this book, as in a provocative speech Adler gave long ago criticizing the theory of the evolutionary origin of man, he seems to forget that human infants are only potentially "human," if that means concept-forming creatures. (We now know that the brain cells are radically deficient during the first weeks of

our lives.) The gap that some have held can only be bridged by supernatural means is actually crossed after birth by each of us. In an infant there is no more than the potentiality of rational thinking. And, after all, the potentiality for prehuman apelike creatures eventually to evolve into human beings is just as valid an application of this term. The time gap is greater, but what of it? Words like soul, substance and the like add no iota to the solution of such problems. But by neglecting oriental (Buddhist) thought, and that of Whitehead, Adler has limited his insight at this point.

My distinguished contemporary can hardly deny that the difference between politically disfranchised children and politically eligible youths or adults is made more than one of degree only by arbitrary convention. Must not the same be said of Adler's other distinction between those excluded from voting or office-holding because of "pathological deficiency" to the extent that they must be hospitalized?

Having said so much, I must add that I deeply share Adler's concern that the universal rights of human beings, the only political animals on earth, should be given institutional recognition. But in order to stop mistreating fellow human beings we need not waste energy on irrelevant quibbles.

A sufficiently great difference of degree can, for some purposes, "make all the difference." Any reasonable adult, not drastically subnormal human being, able to employ language and other symbols sufficiently to express preferences on issues and candidates, has the capacity to function politically, and it should be our ideal that he or she should have some opportunity so to function. Capacities are to be used. Those have rights for whom there is such a thing as the concept of right. It is a very abnormal adult of whom this is not true.

Adler discusses, without reaching a final conclusion, the question, might not robots reach such a peak of development that we should have to conclude that they have concepts and hence political rights? In this interesting discussion what I miss is the following. All value, other than instrumental, consists in experience, which always has an emotional aspect or feeling tone, whether or not there is much problem-solving going on. Machines can solve, but do not have problems. The problems they solve are ours, not theirs. In short, to think in the full sense is to care about answers to questions, not just to produce answers. We know that other animals have feelings because (a) we have them, and (b) not just their behavior but their internal bodily structure resembles ours, includ-

ing structures that influence emotions and sensations, rather than merely determining actions or solving problems. Most philosophical traditions throw little light on the mind-body relation so far as emotional and value aspects are concerned. No robot now planned or foreseeable is likely to have an emotional life of its own. So it will be but an instrument, with no political rights at all.

An example of the price Adler pays for his scorn for degree versions of the animal-human distinction is that it forces him to reject the third, and I believe correct, view of freedom mentioned above. Since he also rejects the second view, that favorite sophism of intellectuals that supposes that a thinking animal could fit its thinking and action into absolute and precisely predetermined causal patterns, he is left with the first or dualistic view that man is a sheer exception to the order of nature. In this he is defying the basic intuitions of scientists generally. And why does he reject the third or nondualistic solution—the view that all individuality, even of a cell or an atom, implies at least some trivial escape from any absolute routine? He rejects this because, if the atom is free in this sense then the difference between man and atom, or man and ape, is one of degree, and wants a difference of kind. But what has this to do with politics or morals? The freedom of an atom obviously is not moral political freedom, according to any philosophy. And neither is the freedom of an ape. So the absolute difference asserted between man and the other animals is superfluous for the purpose Adler wants it to serve. But the intellectual repugnance many of us feel for dualism is needlessly brought into play by Adler's tactic. He has gained nothing essential for ethics or political philosophy but lost something for cosmology.

I have been quarreling with my fellow philosopher in a manner that I hope shows that I consider him one of the ablest men alive in our subject, one of those most worth taking seriously. Moreover, when it comes to Adler's most recent book, *The Common Sense of Politics*, my attitude becomes one of wholehearted admiration and deep agreement. Here Adler shows where his greatest talent or genius lies: above all, he is a political philosopher. Here I look up to him; he teaches me far more than I could possibly teach him. Any defects in the rest of his thinking seem to become insignificant in this part of it. He knows what the best students of the subject have written; he knows the most relevant aspects of the contemporary situation; he employs most happily his ability to formulate issues sharply, to marshal pertinent arguments bearing upon possible solutions, to avoid undue elaboration of secondary matters while being sufficiently explicit on the main lines of his doctrine, to be lucid and forceful while avoiding bigotry or mere

rhetoric.

This book speaks to our basic needs in our perilous situation. We need to see a star to which we can hitch our wagons, to echo Emerson. Adler sees that star and will, I hope, help many to see it.

After explaining the nature of political philosophy and its relations to ethics, Adler examines and refutes the currently somewhat popular anarchistic idea that ideally we should have no government at all. He then sets forth three great “revolutions” or fundamental advances in political thought, none anything like fully realized in practice and thus all still continuing movements. The first, or Greek revolution, is the idea of political equality, or democracy, although only for the few, for an elite; the second, or American revolution, is the idea of democracy for the many or for all; the third, or Russian revolution, is the idea of economic democracy for all. It seems to me that in this simple three-step version Adler has hit on something superbly right. He argues that without a substantial measure of economic equality genuine political equality cannot be achieved. Kant said as much, but without seeing, as clearly as Adler, that this poses a perennial problem.

The ideal that sums up the three revolutions, an ideal nowhere actually embodied in any country, is that of the classless, socialist democratic republic. But, and this seems to call for a fourth revolution, in order to realize the ideal, we need genuine world peace, which means world government. That this is immensely difficult Adler concedes. (See also his *How to Think about War and Peace*.) His point is that it is inherent in our professed ideals, ideals that we cannot give up. Moreover, the technological feasibility of world government did not exist before this century, for the same reason that world wars did not exist. Thus it is too soon to say what can or cannot be done. Also, the nature of those wars shows that war itself is becoming more and more destructive of democracy. There is then only one path that can in the long run lead toward a better world, the path at the end of which is a democratic socialist world republic formed from smaller republics of the same kind.

“Socialism” as an ideal does not for Adler mean state capitalism (as in Russia), but “universal capitalism,” in contrast to “mixed economies,” and in sharper contrast to the oligarchic capitalism we have now in some countries. The mixed economy tends toward state capitalism, which can never be classless, even if it succeeds in providing a decent minimum of economic resources for everyone. One wishes that Adler had given an additional lecture or


chapter on possible ways to work out the concept of universal capitalism. Here a team of economic theorists might be helpful. Adler mentions still another form of socialism, the cooperative or syndicalist form. He allows for the possibility that neither this nor universal capitalism is feasible, in which case we must do the best we can with mixed capitalism.

If the foregoing is not in outline what we should try to find our way toward, I have no idea what is. Obviously something is wrong when one must be at least a millionaire to run for office, while large segments of the population are economically insecure or miserably destitute. Moreover, as long as we fail to see that Russian or Chinese idealism tends to be strong just where ours is weak, we shall not have the right attitude to achieve peace with our two most populous national rivals. The mere capitalism-socialism dichotomy leads nowhere but to conflict and misunderstanding. All industry is capitalistic, but ours is obviously and rather grossly oligarchic. That is what we need to reflect upon if we are to bring home to ourselves the truth that we are not simply “the good guys” and the others “the bad guys.” We are all somewhat bad and somewhat good. The point is not merely to preserve our good from the others’ bad, but to preserve the good wherever it is found from the bad wherever it is found. And some of the bad, as our youth keep loudly telling us, is right at home.

Nowhere in Adler’s book do I see chauvinism, whether national, racial, class-conscious, age-gap conscious, or whatever. Nor do I sense any merely personal, self-serving motivation. To a rare extent indeed, the voice seems really to be that of universal human reason and aspiration. Adler is no bigoted advocate of law and order against revolutionary violence; but neither is he a bigoted advocate of such violence. He is the advocate of institutional progress where it certainly is imperative, by nonviolent means to the fullest possible extent; but progress, he insists, there must be: I agree with him.

Nothing is easier than to accuse such a book of oversimplification. All human thinking simplifies, or it loses itself in indecisive and unhelpful qualifications and nebulosities. As Whitehead put it, we should seek simplicity—and mistrust it. But first we must have the simplicity, or we have nothing. Now it seems to me a superb achievement that Adler really has succeeded in presenting, with wonderful lucidity and economy, the ultimate ideals by which political thought should henceforth be guided and the most essential considerations supporting their validity. It is arguable that they are less completely and literally “feasible” and more “utopian” than he

admits, but then how right he is to stress in a time of ever-changing knowledge and ever-new technological resources, the difficulty of knowing what the limits of human action may be. And even if he is mistaken in thinking that institutional political progress could reach an absolute goal, he is right in making the point that in any case individuals would always have something to strive for in teaching and learning from one another, in friendship and love, since the absolute goal is more than political or institutional but is the good life in every individual.

This book seems to me a paradigm of philosophy serving the needs of mankind. 

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Charles Hartshorne (1897–2000) His 104 years of life were dedicated to philosophical study and it is no exaggeration to say that he decidedly reshaped our conception of God, creativity, and the nature of our relation to each other. He taught at the University of Chicago, Haverford College, Emory University, and the University of Texas at Austin.

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